

Alfar's Spice

James Milne

January 2020

Contents

Alfar's Spice	5
Maps	6
Prologue	13
Astarte	14
Mikhael	16
Akheron	18
Alfar	20
Malis	22
Charity	25
Temperance	27
Alfar's Spice	30
Astarte	31
Mikhael	35
Akheron	38
Alfar	41
Malis	44
Charity	46
Temperance	49
Astarte	52
Mikhael	55

CONTENTS	2
Akheron	58
Alfar	61
Malis	64
Charity	68
Temperance	70
Astarte	74
Mikhael	77
Akheron	80
Alfar	83
Malis	87
Charity	91
Temperance	94
Astarte	97
Mikhael	100
Akheron	103
Alfar	106
Malis	110
Charity	114
Temperance	117
Astarte	121
Mikhael	124
Akheron	128
Alfar	131
Malis	135
Charity	139
Temperance	142
Astarte	145

Mikhael	148
Akheron	150
Alfar	153
Malis	156
Charity	159
Temperance	162
Astarte	166
Mikhael	170
Akheron	174
Alfar	178
Malis	181
Charity	184
Temperance	187
Astarte	190
Mikhael	193
Akheron	197
Alfar	200
Malis	203
Charity	206
Temperance	210
Astarte	213
Mikhael	216
Akheron	218
Alfar	220
Malis	222
Charity	224
Temperance	226

Return to the world of *Summer Garden*.

A hundred years on from the Calamity and the Godless Night, Alfar is running from her destiny, as the Hellbound Twins move into town.

Alfar's Spice

Maps

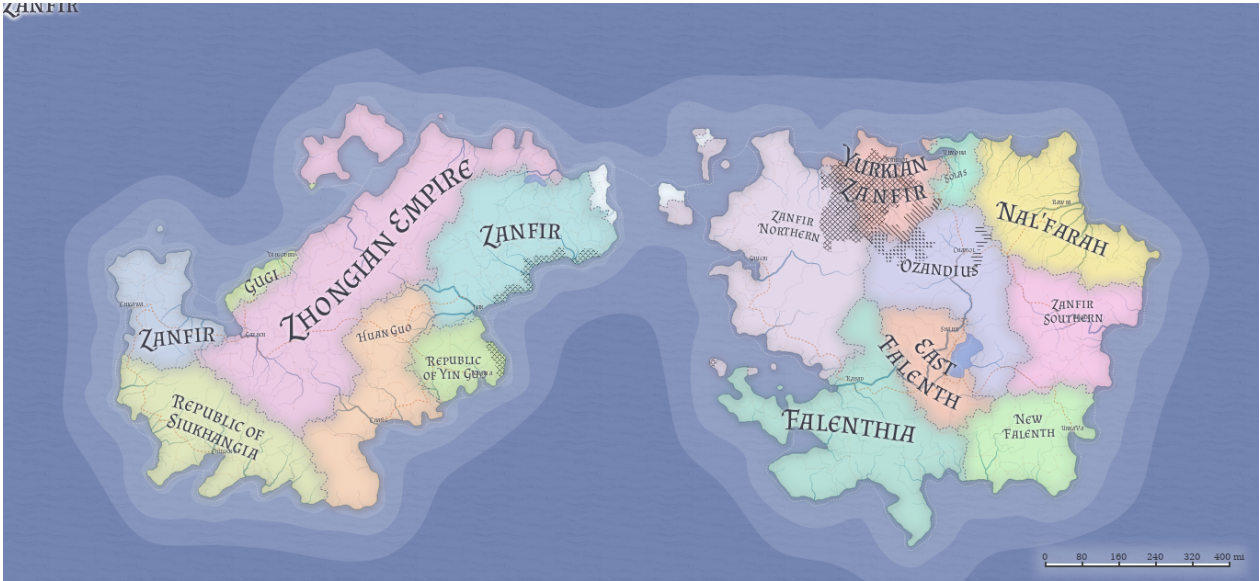


Figure 1: World Map



Figure 2: Falenthia



Figure 3: Northern Falenthia





Figure 4: Adairoft

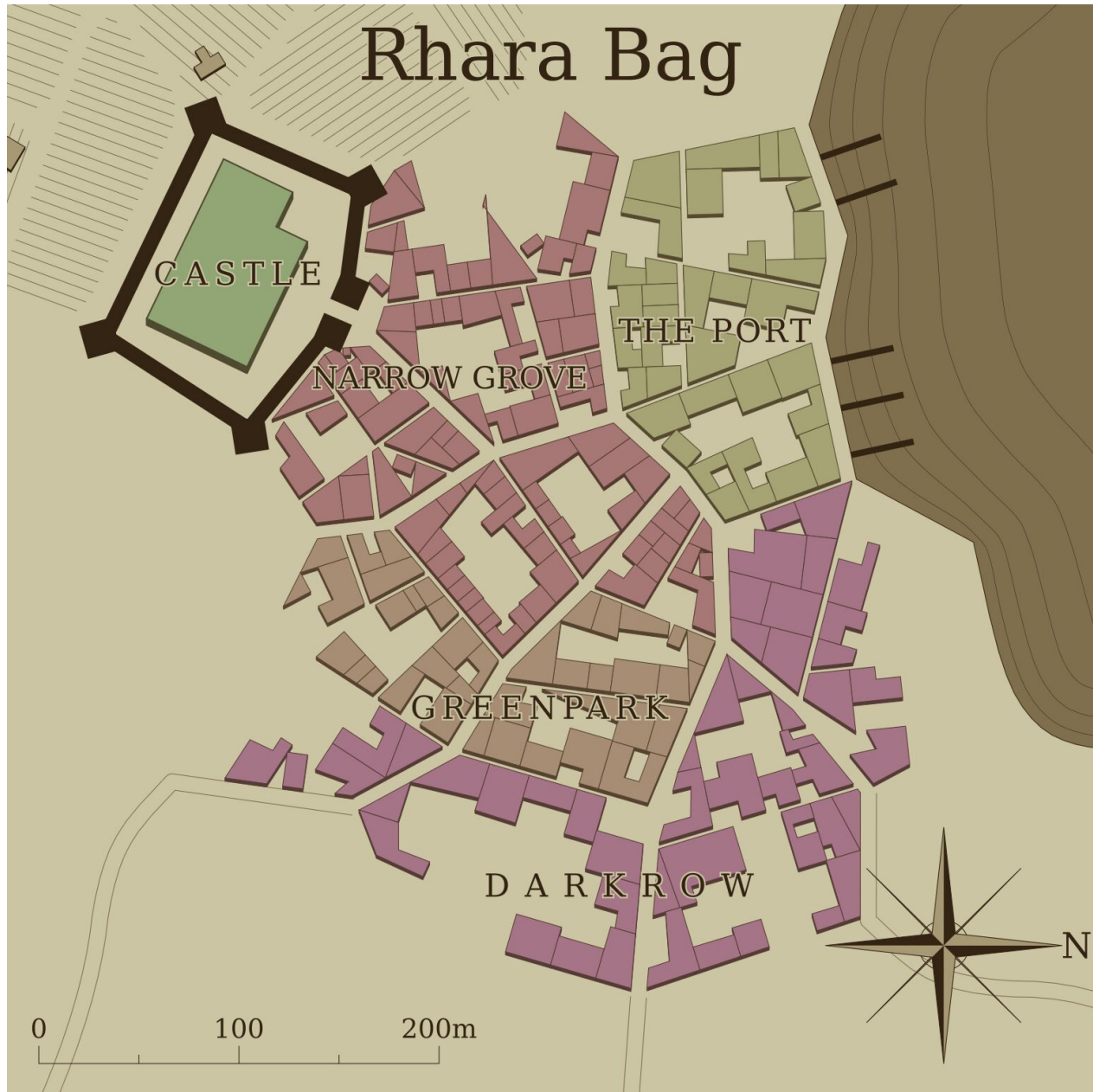


Figure 5: Rhara Bag



Figure 6: Davosi

Prologue

Astarte

Two figures stood amongst the weeds. They were the same height, the same apparent age. At first glance they appeared human, but the longer you looked the more you realised they weren't. Both had brilliant red hair, the woman's hanging down to her waist, whilst the man's was cut as short as a soldier's.

Around each waist was an identical scaled green belt, but it seemed to move without the one wearing it moving. The woman's appearance was more telling. Her midriff was exposed, showing off red scaled on either of her sides, beginning just above her hips.

"Are you sure about this?" Akheron said, as he spoke, perfectly shaped fangs flashed in the sunlight, revealing how little he appeared to have with humanity, even if one of his mother's had been.

He looking pointedly at the gaping hole in the thatch roof, as if reminding her that he wouldn't be the one to repair it. As if she didn't know he was only good for wrecking things.

Astarte shrugged, "It's a home. There aren't a lot of houses in this area up for grabs. It's close enough to the Wildlands that we can make a living, like we planned. A house in Old Water is ten times the price. You need a king's ransom to get inside the city walls. And we promised we wouldn't cheat. So, yeah. This seems a decent idea."

Akheron frowned, looking past the farmhouse, "Most of the land ours, too?"

"Yeah."

He smiled slowly, "Enough space to practice some explosion magic. So long as the townspeople don't completely flip out, I'd be okay with this."

He had not changed one iota since they were born. Always obsessed with mastering his one incredibly destructive form of magic. She studied everything she could come across, expanding her horizons. In a hundred years, her brother had mastered a single spell. He didn't care about much else.

She cared about other things. Too much. She was feeling guilty about that. She was the reason they'd had to leave Ozandius, after getting tangled into a love triangle between the king, and a determined paladin. Both of which had sworn to hunt her to the ends of the world. Which meant her brother couldn't completely destroy the same abandoned castle, day after day. He had a right to be annoyed with her.

It had been fun at first, playing the two off against each other. Making them compete whilst she gave both of them exactly nothing. Not even holdings hands, whilst promising everything. It had become less fun when the paladin brought her a hundred goblin heads, and the king one-upped him by executing two hundred criminals. Why did boys always think violence was attractive?

All they did was remind her of her brother, and that was probably the fastest turn off in the 'verse. She hadn't been very kind when she rejected them, which in retrospect had been kind of stupid. Don't tell a king you'd cut off parts that he'd rather keep if he even thought of you again.

It was at times like these that she wished that she was like her mother and liked girls, and she had tried it a few times, but they simply weren't as interesting to her as the boys were. The stupid, arrogant and reckless boys.

Akheron shrugged, "If this is what we can afford, I guess we have to."

Astarte turned his shoulders, "See the house at the end, way over there?"

He nodded, "Sure. Seems like nobody wants to build near it."

"It's a tavern." Astarte smiled, "So you can spend your silver there whilst I spend it making sure we have a home. How does that sound?"

Akheron looked guiltily at the ground, "Sorry. I know I should save."

Astarte smiled and hugged his shoulder, he was an idiot at times, but he was also her brother. Together, no one could beat them. "It's fine. This is our fresh start. I'm sorry, about Ozandius. I know I shouldn't have egged them on."

Akheron rolled his eyes, "Not your fault every mortal wants to bed you the moment they see you. I get that curse. I don't blame you."

He did get it, actually. They were twins, and he received his own slice of that sort of attention. It never went anywhere because he didn't care about it and only ever wanted to blow crap up, but it had caused one or two issues of its own.

She did wonder if her brother was gay at times, and had asked him once. He'd shrugged and said he didn't know, because he'd never been attracted to anyone at all. Which had done nothing at all but confuse her.

Astarte touched her coin pouch, counting the coins again, "Okay. I'll head into town and sign the papers. See if the tavern has any wanted posters, so we can get a head start on things."

Mikhael

He cleaned the mugs carefully, arranging each of them onto the shelves with absolute precision. This was the only time he got to take his time and enjoy this. The tavern saw people of all ages, all moods, all day. Times were fierce, and people were hardly coping with Falenthia and Zanfir at each other's throats.

Adairoft was not far from the border with Zanfir Northern. Bandits and overzealous soldiers skirmished across the lines all the time. Both empires would condemn the actions, but it was little more than sabre rattling. Neither side was prepared to invest in a war, not yet. They both had too much to lose.

It meant uncertainty for most, and business for him. He had a mage on staff for putting food and ale on the table, so long as they were happy, he wasn't under much of a threat. The Vizier paid him a part of every warrant he posted on his wall, which meant that the more incursions there were, the more coin he saw.

It was brutal, and made him feel guilty at times, but it kept the gold flowing. Life was only guaranteed by gold, in the end. Friendships never lasted, and romances died silently. He didn't care for any of those things. They were just smoke on the water, to him. So he had to be a little brutal.

He heard footsteps and sighed, "We're not open, yet."

"Sorry." A voice he didn't recognise replied, a stiff but young one. He turned and nearly burst out laughing. It looked like a child had stuffed himself into a mercenaries uniform. Tall, but thin. Like he hadn't grown into his body yet.

Mikhael shook his head, "Please tell me you're not an adventurer."

The boy glared at him, "An elf. I would have thought you would know how to show a little more respect for something like me."

His face fell instantly, "Quarter elf. Also, that isn't something to go spreading around. I will be... Angry, if you do."

"That's not much of a threat." The boy shrugged, "Tell me, what am I?"

Mikhael sized him up slowly. The snake around his waist for a belt, the red hair, and fangs. He'd thought it was just some bandit sharpening his teeth to look radical, but they might be real. The kid was puffing up his chest even when faced with a part-elf attacking him, which was more than most people would feel safe to do.

"An idiot." Mikhael shrugged.

The boy grinned at him, "I am Akheron, the Fury."

Mikhael blinked in surprise. He knew the name, and the race. The boy was supposedly one of a pair of twins that had blitzed their way across Ozandius. He had a talent for destruction. Apparently they'd even taken on an insurrection, though most of the glory had gone to a paladin travelling with them. "Really."

Akheron blinked, his eyes opening and closing vertically. For a moment, Mikhael could swear that he saw the red of the eyes glowing through the closed eyelids. The Fury spoke slowly, enunciating, "I am trying not to piss you off, but you're beginning to irritate me. Look, we're buying a farm near here. I'll be in to see the wanted posters most days."

Mikhael shrugged, "Everyone has a right to. If you survive, I might reconsider. But we're not

open yet. So, take a hint, kid.”

Akheron’s hands clenched, and Mikhael felt a surge of mana in the figure. The boy cracked his neck, and the mana flow in the area returned to normal. Emotional, but able to control it if he had to. That was essential if the boy was to get along with the people whose work he’d be taking.

Akheron mock bowed, “As you wish, barkeep.”

“Mikhael.” He replied, waving a sign at the door, “Or Mike, if you find it easier to say.”

Akheron laughed, “Mikhael will do. I’ll see you later, elf.”

“Shut up, Fury.” He replied to his back.

That boy would be trouble with the regulars. They would not be happy to be upstaged by something that looked so frail and weak. If Akheron really was who he said he was, he would blitz passed the regulars and become one of the best in the area easily.

Akheron

Even in a place as frequently troubled as this, there was no guild. That suited him. Ozandia had a guild, and he was required to register and train with them for three years before he was even allowed to collect bounties. It had just got worse from there. Only able to take on bounties linked to the number of years he had been with them.

There was no acknowledgement of skill when it came to the Hunter's Guild. They existed across both continents now, an export of Zanfir. It probably wouldn't be long until the guild sent someone to strong arm the Vizier of Adairoft into forcing all adventurers to sign on with them. The guild was a political force to be reckoned with.

The guild also had a problem with him. He'd been evicted from the guild, after he got angry whilst be stripped down for damaging public property. The man screaming at him had never held a sword in his life, and certainly didn't understand how hard it was to bring down a rampaging troll. Akheron had got too angry, and the things around him in the room, like awards, medals and honours, started exploding. The mortals hadn't understood it wasn't on purpose.

He was a Fury. Controlling his temper wasn't something he was supposed to be able to do. That being said, he shouldn't have been a he, either. He was the first male Fury, ever born. He was one of triplets. One of them hadn't survived their birth. It had been a rough entry into the world, feeling that loss. A loss both he and his sister still felt.

They could feel each other, and what each other was feeling, across any distance. They were linked together, as much as it irritated them. He really didn't like getting flashes of his sister's embarrassment in the midst of a battle as she got caught checking out whatever idiot had decided to worship the ground she walked on.

He didn't see what she saw in the mortals. They were both a hundred years old, and the mortals never lived that long. She would watch them grow old and die before she even needed a haircut. There was no point connecting to creatures that were so short lived. The only possible outcome was one of pain and loss.

Yet, his mother had. She'd sworn her promise to a mortal woman. His other mother. Their combined genetics had produced him. He was, technically, part human. It was why he could be male when no others of his race had ever been. He knew both his Muk'to and Muk'da had adored each other, and that was the reason he existed. All the same, he couldn't see himself linking his life to a mortal like his Muk'to had.

He sighed, walking passed the wall, flipping a copper coin to a nearby guard. The man stepped forward, "Halt. Who are you, what is your business here?"

"Akheron." He replied, turned to look at the overzealous guard with a pained look of irritation, "I'm the new owner of the northern farm."

The guard frowned, "I saw a girl who looked like you say the same thing."

"Astarte is my sister." He replied tightly, flashing his fangs, "We're adventurers. I just wanted to walk around town. Mike's isn't open yet."

The guard shook his head, "Not like that, you aren't. I'll need you to take off the claws, and sword. Nobody enters armed."

Akheron held up his hand, looking at the curved black talons at the end of his fingers, "Yeah, these are mine. Like, actually mine. I can't take them off."

The guard shrugged, "Then you don't get in."

Akheron glared, "I'm not human, you idiot."

The man started in surprise, and looked him up and down, "Then what are you?"

"A Fury." He snapped.

To most mortals, that meant a demon. The hells might be gone, but the memory of them remained. The memory of the torturers and soul hunters. Demons and Furies had both survived the collapse, and as they slowly discovered Hero's role, they'd grown to truly despise each other.

The guard swallowed slowly, "A Fury is moving here. Two Furies. I have to be honest, that sounds like a bad idea. People don't like nonhumans here. I don't. So why don't you leave?"

Akheron bristled, and was about ready to break the man when someone drifted excitedly in-between them. It was an elf, a full-blooded elf from the look of her. She grinned at the guard, "You're upsetting my boyfriend. Be nice, Sam. Or Garmr will get angry."

The guard held up his hands quickly, "As you wish, Lady Alfar."

She turned and grinned at him, and Akheron felt strangely anxious. "Come along, Akheron, I need to open the shop."

How did she know who he was? And why did she say he was her boyfriend?

Alfar

She could kick herself. He wasn't her boyfriend, not yet. She just remembered it. Remembered when she'd kissed him beneath a tree. That hadn't happened yet for him. She just knew it, felt it. Just like she didn't want to.

The Fates may have decided that she would have him, but he was an irritating little idiot. Picking fights with the city guards. Parading around like the world belonged to him, and everyone else was just lucky enough to walk in his shadow, to witness him as he destroyed everything in his path.

Violence was not sexy, not in the least. Yet Akheron thought the world of explosive magic. It was annoying.

She smiled, patting the hellhound beside her as she walked, "This is Garmr. He's my dog. He likes you."

The Fury nodded dubiously, "You said you were opening a shop?"

"My shop." She grinned, spinning around to walk backwards, and deftly side-stepping around the crowd as they moved, "It's a teashop. I like it. I can eat all the cookies I want. Garmr gets jealous. Too much sugar in his gears. I hate cleaning it."

Akheron smiled slowly, unable to help himself. "And how do you know me, elf?"

"Ooh." She clapped her hands, "You don't remember! This isn't our first time we met. I think. It can be hard. I remember the future."

Akheron shook his head, "Sorry, I don't remember you. I would have thought I'd remember. You're a bit... Different."

She stuck her tongue out at him, "So rude. Always so rude. Garmr doesn't like that. You need to be careful."

The warning was well-placed. The hellhound was glaring at him, and considering whether or not he could eat the Fury before he let off an explosive spell. Hellhounds were weapons of war, developed to destroy whole armies. Alfar had rebuilt Garmr herself. He was her friend, one of her only friends.

It was lonely, being able to see everything. People didn't like it when you knew all their secrets, all their choices, before they made them. You had to pretend to not know, most of the time. Pretend to let them choose their tea as you prepared to make it.

She turned around, unlocking her door with a quick spell, "Welcome, to Alfar's Spice!"

Akheron stepped in slowly behind her, "It's small."

Rude. Insulting. As always. Alfar's jaw clenched, and she picked a biscuit off a shelf and tossed it near the fireplace. Garmr appeared where it landed, shifting through reality. She flicked a finger to light the fire, and shrugged, "I wish you hadn't moved here, yet. I find it hard to focus, Akheron. To remember the now. I remember too much of the past."

The Fury nodded, looking around, "So, when did we first meet?"

"Before... After. After you were born." She nodded, "Bel was gone. It had to be after. With Selene."

Akheron shrugged, "You're not giving me much, and making me trust you less and less. You know my aunt."

“Alfar.” She snapped angrily, “That’s my name. Just try and remember it, stupid. Instead of insulting me. I let you into my shop, let you into the city. Is respect too much for the boy who yells ex’pa?”

Akheron glared at her, “I am not a boy.”

“Alfar.” She insisted.

He shrugged, “Vaguely. I might recognise the name.”

“Alfar and Alteo.” She replied angrily, and he blinked in surprise, “The Sibyl? Wait, you’re the Sibyl who could see past and future all at once, aren’t you?”

Alfar crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue. He really did annoy her. She did not know how the hell she fell for him. He was so ridiculously slow.

“Why did you call me your boyfriend?”

Alfar looked off distantly, “Did I?”

The misdirection didn’t entirely work. He was still razor-focused on her as she placed the kettles on the iron surface and heated it gently, keeping the water just below boiling point. She waved at a wall of dried herbs, “Which would you like?”

Akheron seemed surprised, “I... Don’t drink tea.”

“Yes, you do.” Alfar giggled, waltzing over and tapping one of the jars, “I keep this just for you. Dragon’s claw. Too rough on human stomachs. Only orks and Furies can drink it. Feels like fire.”

The Fury relented, “Fine. I guess I’ll try it, if you say. I don’t know how to say this without insulting you... But you seem younger than me. Even though you’re older.”

“Two hundred and seventeen!” She grinned at him, “I’m twice your age, Akheron. Though, I am an elf. I age different. Age like Astarte. Ooh. Today’s the day for her. You need to be nice. She’ll feel unhappy. Give her a tart. Lemon is her favourite.”

Akheron looked over, “I’m not sure I can afford that.”

“No price today.” Alfar shook her head, “Today I got embarrassed. Didn’t mean to see you, before you know me. Come back tomorrow. Then you can pay me. The hunt was terrible, but you got paid.”

The Fury sat down, shaking his head with amusement. “Anyone ever tell you you’re cute?”

The hellhound let out a warning growl from his place by the fire, making the Fury suddenly realise that the creature dominated the tiny room, and that even lying down he was half as tall as the building.

“Garmr, shoosh.” Alfar instructed with a pouting face, “Akheron is a friend. Well, his sister is. She won’t like it if you eat him.”

Malis

She brushed her stubborn hair, dragging the comb through the grimy threads, trying to free them. She could have let the black threads tangle up and become dreadlocks, but she hated the smell.

Her hair was dirtier than normal after yesterday. One of the more drunk customers had poured an ale over her head after she'd slapped his hand away. It was a couple days until she could have a shower. She'd relish it, as she always did.

She could hear her master in the next room, taking receipt of the latest warrants. He'd post them to the board once the customers arrived. She'd asked him why he didn't do it before they arrived. He'd mentioned something about the excitement of making it an event that she had been too bored to listen to.

She smiled at her silver bracelet. He might be her master, but he didn't treat her that way. He treated her like family. It had confused her, after the cruelty of the training house. They'd beat the truth into her. That she was barely even human.

Except her master wasn't, either. Apparently one of his parents was a half elf. She could see it. He wasn't handsome, he was pretty. He had the jawline of an elf. Delicate hands, which he had by always working them to the bone. She'd been tempted to give him a manicure in his sleep.

She grinned at that. He didn't mind her pranks, and in fact encouraged them. Especially if it meant her joining in with the other waitresses. Anything that made the others forget that she lived here for a reason.

She put down the comb. That was enough luxury. She was still his slave, and had work to do. He might not yell at her to do it now, but she had to pull her weight. He didn't have a reason to hold onto her if she wasn't good at what she did.

Which she was. She was extremely good at flirting with the customers, making them think they have a chance and making them come back, time after time. Made them salivate over the black girl as they bought food and drink just to be able to have her undivided attention.

Malis dropped the spare shirt of Mikhael's that he'd given her to sleep in on the bed, and picked up the uniform. It was a black dress, flared around the waist. It was pocked with holes from age, sunburned into various patches. All the same, it was hers. She'd never owned anything before.

Well, not since she'd agreed to become a slave instead of starving to death on the street.

She slipped the dress on easily, tucking it until it fit in all the right places and moved out into the main room. She smiled and gave a twirl as Mikhael turned around. The man smiled, sending a thrill down her back. "Ready for work, Malis?"

She adored it when he used her name. It made her feel wobbly inside. That feeling. She hadn't known it at the training house. Mikhael had taught her a little of what it meant, after she'd been caught staring at a couple kissing each other in a darker corner of the tavern.

She didn't think it would be right to tell him that she got it every time he looked at her. That might be inappropriate. It might not. By rights, he should be able to use her for that every night. She'd been trained to expect it, but not to enjoy it.

He was too kind. Which made her heart dance all the more.

She curtsied, "Of course."

"I expect a few problems today." Mikhael said, "Can you get some extra chairs from the shed?"

Malis nodded and dashed out the side door quickly. She didn't run when there were customers about. They couldn't think of her as flighty. She had to be the woman in control of their desires. Not the young girl that she actually was.

She wasn't quite sure how old she was. She'd been dumped on the street when she was young. She knew that. Nobody had nursed her, so she had to assume she was old enough to care for herself, but she didn't remember.

She got along with people who looked like they were the same age as her. Most of those were in their late teenage years, or early adulthood. She was somewhere there. Young enough to draw eyes, old enough that people weren't entirely creeped out by the idea.

She dragged the chairs into an alcove in the kitchen, near where she slept. She stopped and folded the shirt, sniffing it and cuddling it for a moment. It was Mikhael's. It felt like him, at times.

She turned to go, when she stopped. There was a sound. There shouldn't really be any sound in the kitchen, they hadn't started cooking or cleaning yet. It wasn't a tap dripping. It was like a wind, but none of the windows was open.

She tiptoed around, straining her ears. It seemed to be getting quieter, the closer she got to it. Like it was teasing her, or testing her. She was reminded of the way some of the slave trainees had baited newcomers, before springing a trap on them.

She should probably get Mikhael, but if she could barely hear it, then he probably wouldn't be able to at all. He'd shrug it off and go back to work. This had to be her problem to solve. Something to tell him, and make him be proud of her. Unless it was just a noisy pipe.

She paused in front of a pile of dishes and leaned in. The noise was coming from them, or at least on top of them. It was quieter than ever now, but she could make it out, or at least thought she could. It was a name, being whispered over and over.

"Pelwos?" She asked in confusion.

The grime on one of the dishes spasmed, and she stared, too scared to move. It seemed to pull towards itself, as if trying to make itself more substantial. Make a body for the will.

She scraped it into the palm of her hand. It tickled as it rubbed into her, leaving behind grease, and looked up at her. It had no eyes, but she could feel it looking at her. A small mouth appeared, and opened. "Qedos. Qedos. Qedos."

It wanted her to feed it something. She didn't know what leftover food would eat. More food?

"Malis!" She heard a voice snap, and she spun, looking at Mikhael innocently.

He ran over, and smacked her hand. The tiny creature disappeared with a shriek, and her master held her hands. His own were trembling. Not with anger. Fear. He was staring at her in terror.

"I just heard it." She said, feeling her heart dancing. Her training had kicked in, preventing her from crying. She wouldn't cry, not even if he whipped her for this. "I'm sorry, master."

He breathed a sigh of relief, "You're not in trouble, Malis. You were about to be. That was a spirit. You summoned it. You heard it and pulled it into our world."

Malis swallowed staring at him, "That's... Magic. Crap. Crap. I have magic?"

"Shamanic." Mikhael nodded slowly, "I guess it isn't surprising. The... Things. That probably attacked your mother? They use it. Serve bigger spirits. I should have expected this, I'm sorry. I'll

try and help you.”

Malis shook her head, “Sorry, I don’t want help. I want to forget this ever happened. I won’t listen if I hear another voice.”

Mikhael looked at her with concern, and she could tell he wanted to say something, but he let it go. Instead he gave her a quick hug, sending her terrified brain into a dizzying spin of emotions.

He stood back, “I’m opening doors. Can you roll the barrels downstairs?”

Malis nodded. She could do her work.

Charity

There was a door.

The young woman lying on the bed of pillows, dressed in layers of pink silks, considered getting up. She thought about standing up, moving over and opening the wooden door that had suddenly appeared at the side of her room.

It was weird, a door appearing. That had never happened before. Not since she'd been locked away. She wondered, briefly, how long it had been since she'd been locked away.

She didn't mind being locked up.

She loved her room. Silk, and pillows and always a perfect temperature to lounge around in. If things got boring, she could always entertain herself. Her magic hadn't been locked away, or at least she could use the magic inside the room.

She could do anything she wanted, except leave. Well, now there was a door. Maybe she could leave. She wasn't really interested in leaving. The world hadn't been very fun when she'd been locked away.

Everyone wanted to know her, just to abuse her. To take her power for themselves. That was what it was like, being a djinn. Everyone wanted their wish granted. Even if their wishes were poorly thought out crap that hurt everyone they liked.

Nobody ever listened when she warned them. A badly thought out wish was one of the worst things that could happen to anybody. She could control the magic, but only so much. She could kickstart it, but it had to follow the rules that the mortals asked for in their wish.

Then, it would blow up in their stupid little faces.

She got the blame. She got the crazy witches trying to lock her away, whilst everyone burned everything. Screaming and raising their pitchforks. Begging the gods to help them, so that they could kill her.

When her sisters had told her about their plan, that they meant to seal her away for a hundred years, she'd agreed without even thinking about it. Anything to get away from everyone using her font of magic to cause their own little bit of chaos.

She wasn't on good terms with Kao, the goddess of chaos. She always seemed to end up doing her work, but she didn't like her. A feeling that was mutual. A misunderstanding after Kao's girlfriend was sitting near her, and after she got embarrassed, she wished to disappear. It wasn't like Charity could help it. A wish is a wish.

It had taken Trei and Kru working together to break the spell. Kao owed them favours for that, still. Or probably did. Charity couldn't tell how long had passed, but she didn't expect Kao to be able to repay that one until she was very old. Which meant that Kao would still be pissed at her.

In terms of a djinn, Charity was young. Not quite child young, closer to an adult who didn't yet know how to be an adult. Like an apprentice.

All the first generation djinn were still alive. Charity was a fifth, which meant that all the first generation looked down on her, and got pissed at her. They thought she was impulsive, and stupid. They sought out their solitude, hiding as spirits atop mountains.

Charity hated that. It made some sense. Nobody can make you cast a wish when there is

nobody to talk to. Except it was lonely, and boring. Just meditating, never using the thing that made a djinn what a djinn was.

The first generation didn't believe it. They believed that their magic was nothing. That it didn't define what they were. Charity thought that was stupid and useless and boring and boring and boring.

She smiled, waving a hand.

The magic swirled for a moment and the man stood in front of her. He straightened his tie, and checked his cuffs and then turned slowly and bowed, "Lady Charity."

She sighed, spreading herself out on her bed, "What's with the door, Davos?"

The butler walked over to it, casting a series of spells to determine the nature of it. Everything she couldn't be bothered doing. He tapped his foot, and then turned around slowly, "It is a door, I am certain."

Charity stuck out her tongue at him.

Davos smiled, "It appears to be nothing but a door. I can find nothing particularly magical about it. It doesn't appear to be part of this pocket realm that you have been trapped in, m'lady. But it does appear to not have any magical nature at all. I posit, that if I open it, that nothing at all will happen."

Charity frowned, "Then where did it come from?"

"Uncertain." Davos said, pacing in front of the door again, "It smells strange. Like machinery. Oil, and tar. But there's another smell, less insistent. Flowers, maybe."

Charity stared at him, "Fuck. It's tea. You can smell tea, and a hellhound. Crap. She's trying to summon me. Uh... Blow up the door, please."

Davos sighed and shrugged, "As you wish, m'lady."

She shielded her eyes against the sudden assault of light as the shockwave slammed into her chest, knocking the air out of her. Davos did always tend to overdo things.

"Apologies, m'lady."

Charity sighed, not liking the sound of that. She didn't like the sight either. The door wasn't even marked. Not a single splinter out of place. Which was impossible. The magic she'd given Davos when she made him was quite powerful, and his knowledge quite complete.

She forced herself to her feet, looking at the door, "Fine. She wins. Can't destroy something that doesn't make sense. I guess it's time that I did what I'm supposed to do. Pack the bed would you?"

Davos snapped his fingers, a small pack appearing hanging from his waist. The bed disappeared altogether. He bowed slightly, "Ready, m'lady."

She'd never actually asked him to call her that. He had adopted it, after he realised she'd made him to be a servant, of a kind. He was still her equal. He'd always been free to leave. Only her magic kept her here. Davos had his own, granted by her. Yet he liked to stay.

Charity opened the door.

Temperance

She slammed a hand on the ground, cracking it in every direction. She blinked her eyes furiously. It was too bright. Ridiculously bright. And loud.

Temperance rubbed her face on the back of her hands. She was awake. That was why everything sucked. Felt like magic had damn nearly left the world whilst she was asleep. Like the land had been ravaged by war, and poison and...

She coughed up a ball of black liquid, and stuck out her tongue in disgust. It had tasted horrible. Like a taint on the magical matrix of the world. Corruption of magic itself. What an awful thing. Must have been a Faen invention.

She stumbled down the pile of gemstones, falling most of the way. Her limbs were tired, struggling to wake up. She had no idea how long she'd been asleep. Hope hadn't been very specific when she'd cursed her.

Temperance glared at the stack of gems. There were fewer. Much fewer. And the ground was worn from carts. Someone had been brave. Stealing her gems, whilst she slept. Doing it so often they didn't fear waking her anymore.

She rolled her jaw and turned. Her wings unfurled, spreading out and touching either side of the cave. It felt good to spread them out, to have the skin peel off them for the first time in so long.

Temperance' eye twitched. A hundred layers of skin were peeling off her. A hundred years. No. Longer. Hope had said it'd be a while, but she'd been expecting something like a decade or two. This was too much.

She was the one known for self control. Of the nine, she was the peaceful one. She was irritated that so many of her gems had been stolen. She'd spent time finding them. They weren't summoned with magic. That would be cheating. Hope should have told her how long it would be, so she could protect them better.

Her wings curled up behind her as she walked out of the cave. A flick of her wrist sealed the cave behind her. Not just this entrance. All of them. Even the ones it seemed that someone had dug into the back of the cave.

She scratched her claws through her beard, knocking bugs and flakes of skin to the ground. It was gross, but expected after a hibernation. She'd never slept this long before. That wasn't that she didn't sleep for ages on occasion. She was known to be lazy, sometimes.

Aldene used to pick on her for it, surprise, surprise. Of course the bane of sloth was obsessed with working hard and early mornings. Except this definitely wasn't an early morning.

She couldn't think of a reason Hope had kept her asleep this long. It didn't really make sense. They'd gone to sleep because the others had. Yet, the others were only waiting for the heir. Could the prophecy have taken this long?

She shrugged the thought off. She was patient. Not just patient because of what she was, she was patient even for them. She'd once waited two hundred years for a first date.

She turned, her eyes flashing up at the sun, staring at the shadow crashing down from it. She tossed her blonde hair, "What the hell, Nidoghr?"

He smiled at her, from beneath his black mane of hair, pristinely kept, as always. She stared into those eyes. Those eyes that had been worth the wait. Glowing orange, flecked with yellow. Shifting flecks, looking like the flames he could spew out into the world.

He shrugged, "I sensed you wake. It has been a long time since I sensed any of our kind."

"You were in Mishia, weren't you?" Temperance asked, "During the Godless Night?"

"Yes." Nidoghr nodded, "I didn't like what I saw. I haven't broken my vows since the High Priestess forced me to. I didn't fight Zafir. Well, saved an elf or two. Nothing more."

Temperance sighed, "You're lonely. So that's why you've come to see your ex. An ex who threatened you, quite strongly, to never speak to her again. Even if we were not just the last of our kind, but the last on the plane."

Nidoghr shrugged, shaking his black mane, "I was hoping you'd forgotten that. Or would forgive me."

"You tried to kill me." Temperance smiled, "I do believe I was being patient with you, Ni. Blood feuds between wyrms have been started for less. You and I... We're different than most wyrms. You regret those you've killed. I never lose control. That doesn't mean I can forget what you have done."

The ancient dragon looked at her with disappointment, "That was a very long time ago. I made my vow to never harm another, because of you. Because of what I tried to do to you. Also failed, I might add."

Temperance laughed, "Of course you failed. A flamespitter up against the crystal queen? You never stood a chance. Now. I haven't changed my mind. I would really prefer it if you leave, Ni. I don't like you."

He sighed heavily, "Tempi. Two wyrms don't wake up at the same time for nothing. I intended to sleep passed the end of this world, which by the looks of everything flying one of two flags, is quite soon. Humanity is going to kill themselves, and the rest of the species hiding in refugee camps across the continents."

She glared at him, "Oh, Ni. I know why I woke up. I went to sleep for one purpose. It was a spell. A spell I let someone cast on me. I'm not the only one who woke up. We all did. All nine of us. We're getting the group together. You feeling like something is coming, Ni? We are."

"You can't." He growled, "Can't. If you bring any of them back, then this world is over. Charity? She'll destroy cities. Which are everywhere. She won't be able to escape her own power. Mercy? She'll kill everyone. She is kind, but humans are stupid. They won't understand how badly they outmatched. They've invented new weapons. Dwergaz weapons, powered by new magic."

Temperance shrugged, "And? We won't be fighting them."

"Just accidents, then?" Nidoghr shrugged, "Is that all that they'll be to you, Tempi? The dead. Like last time?"

Temperance glared at him, "Coming from you? How many have you butchered just because you woke up on the wrong side of the treasure chest? How long did it take you to master patience? How many did you kill trying to master your vow of peace? Hundreds? Thousands? Were they just accidents?"

The man clenched and unclenched his hands, "Don't try and play that card, Tempi. You haven't earned it. Last time the nine of you got together, you two a hole in reality that took the goddess of chaos to close. It let in something incredibly dangerous. You let him in. And you couldn't stop him. Kao had to create the seven to drive him off."

"She could have waited." Temperance shrugged, "But instead she asked Hope to put us to

sleep. We didn't even have a chance to hand Tyr his own ass and force him to eat it."

Nidoghr flinched at the violence in her words, and he sighed heavily, "You should go back to sleep, Tempi."

"Last chance to leave." She replied, "I've been really polite. You tried to kill me. You insult me. Try and tell me what to do, when I'm not even from your clan. I'm your ex. Traditionally, one of us would have had to eat the other's heart."

He looked over at her, "I won't let you hurt anyone, Tempi."

She grabbed his shoulders and let out a roar that shook the ground. She'd given him the last chance. She'd been extremely kind to him. Beyond what she should have.

She let go, and wiped the back of her mouth, dropping quartz crystals onto the ground. She looked at the blue crystal surrounding her ex. He absolutely deserved to lie encased in crystal for the rest of his existence.

Yet, her gems had been getting stolen by some nearby kingdom. No doubt that Ni would be sold off as some exotic thing. Or channelled by a mage who had no idea that channelling the magic of wyrm would instantly burn them out and turn them inside out and destroy everyone nearby.

Temperance rolled her eyes, and then kissed the crystal. It cracked. A few hours, and he would be free. Enough time for her to leave. To get ready for the task she'd woken up to perform.

Enough time to find the others.

Alfar's Spice

Astarte

She held the deed, trying to suppress her excitement. It was difficult. She'd never owned a home before. She'd only ever rented, or been gifted a place to stay by those who remembered her Muk'to. They were kind, but this was hers. Paid for with her hard work.

The bank manager smiled, "Now, about the mortgage payments. If you fall behind, then I'm afraid that we don't handle repayments or the encouragements that may come with them. Those are handled by the Hunter's Guild."

Astarte resisted the urge to rip the man open from throat to groin. "I used to be a Hunter. I understand."

The manager looked at her in surprise, "Used to be? Aren't you still in that same profession? I know the Guild doesn't have a permanent presence in town yet, but they are looking into creating one within the next couple of years."

"I was evicted." Astarte sighed, "My brother insulted one of the higher ups. He has a temper. So do I."

The manager nodded slowly, "So long as we understand each other."

"100 silver, twice a week, on Summereve and Treiday." She nodded, "You won't need to worry about it."

The man smiled at her, making her skin crawl, and waved towards the door. She turned to leave, feeling grateful to get away from this man who knew he was in control and power, and adored every moment of it.

As her hand hit the door handle, the man spoke again, "When you see her, let Alfar know she's behind again."

Astarte turned to look at him in surprise, "Who's Alfar?"

She left the office none the wiser. Just that the manager seemed convinced she knew who he was talking about. She wondered how much danger the person was in. By their name, they probably had elfin heritage. Rare, but not unheard of since the elfin had claimed Ozandius as their new home, lead by their queen, Alis.

Ozandius really had been fairly stable, it had been a shame to leave it, to choose a side. It felt like choosing a side, living in Falenthia. She didn't want any part of the warring talks between the two empires. She didn't particularly like the idea of an empire. But this place should be safe enough, whilst still giving her the outlet.

Furies needed the violence. They were born to be soldiers, to protect something that no longer existed. A prison that her Muk'to had helped to destroy, at the cost of her life. It had hurt, when she'd been told that she was gone. That the two of them were now alone in Solas.

They'd stayed there a while, but Akheron and she had grown up. They couldn't stay in the nest forever. They'd left Be Liphu, and never looked back. Now and then she felt nostalgic for it, and she knew Akheron still portalled there occasionally, to get a particular shopkeeper's toffee apples. He was sentimental about it, but tried not to let her know, so she pretended not to notice.

She followed her sense of him, clutching the deed, and paused outside the shop. It was small, but it was also in King's Land. It must be expensive to rent. The name of the shop was also too much to be a coincidence. Alfar's Spice. She guessed it was some kind of alchemy place, and she could see jars of dried herbs against a wall, confirming the idea.

She stepped inside slowly, and glared at her brother, who was sipping tea. He pushed out a chair without turning to face her. She sat down slowly, “Already spending our coin, I see.”

Akheron shook his head, “This is a treat from Alfar. The tart is for you.”

Astarte looked at him suspiciously as he pushed it across the table to her, and picked up a small fork, “Don’t think that makes me forgive you. Why is Alfar treating us?”

A voice from a back kitchen called, “Assie! I’ll be right there, just in the middle of something!”

Astarte turned, glaring, “Did she just call me Assie?”

“Alfar knows us.” Akheron said slowly, “I think she’s the Alfar of the Sibyls, back from a couple days after we were born. I don’t remember much from back then.”

Astarte turned back slowly, staring at the table as her heart dropped like a stone. That Alfar had been the one to tell her that both her Muk’to and Muk’da wouldn’t be coming home. That she’d lost a sister, and both her mothers. That she was alone in the ’verse, apart from Akheron. It made her heart ache all over again.

She put a piece of the tart in her mouth, savouring the explosion of sweet and sour as a tear fell down her cheek.

Arms wrapped around her from behind, and she felt an explosion of emotions next to her. She very nearly tossed the person off and spun to fight them, but resisted the urge as she felt a cheek pressed against hers.

The elf suddenly released her, and sat down beside her, “Sorry. You don’t know me yet, do you? I forget.”

As the elf said the last word, she seemed to almost burst into tears. Astarte considered her slowly. Elfin were eternal, they lived until someone killed them, and then ceased to exist. It was entirely possible this was the same elf who had come to tell them they were orphans. She looked similar, and was just as over-enthusiastic.

Astarte patted her hand, “That’s a curse from Ausosa, isn’t it?”

“Yes and no.” Alfar shrugged, “It would have happened anyway. I live simultaneously. Every possible moment, past and present. I might be here, but I’m also fighting Pheter. Trying to save Dyys. They are now for me, just like now means you are here, in my teashop.”

Astarte winced, “That must be hell.”

“Hell was your mother torturing souls in the tenth circle, knowing it was the wrong thing, building up courage to run away from Hero.” Alfar replied, tears forming in her eyes, “She’s so brave.”

Akheron put a hand on the table firmly, “It’s past for us. Please.”

Alfar wiped a tear away, “Sorry. It must hurt.”

Astarte glared at her brother, “Shut up. She can’t get over it. It’s still happening for her, be nice.”

“He’s so rude.” Alfar pouted, “Always. He is even going to be rude to the city guard. Makes me make sure he can get in.”

Akheron let out a sound of annoyance, “He was being racist. Did you have to tell him I was your boyfriend to get me in?”

Alfar blushed quickly, almost quick enough for Astarte to miss it. She didn't, but she could tell Akheron did. He was too focused on himself. She grinned to herself, looking at the elf. What did she think of her brother?

He'd never had anyone. Never interested enough. Too focused on his work or being him to realise that girls could actually notice him. That his looks weren't enough if he wanted to sustain that interest, he had to actually tone down the jerk.

Alfar shrugged, "It worked, didn't it?"

"I don't have a girlfriend." Akheron said petulantly, "I don't want one. Certainly not you."

"Behave." Astarte snapped, trying to cut him off before he buried himself. "She gave you tea. Be nice."

Alfar grinned at her, "How's the tart? That's my first one. Shop was just tea, but it isn't doing very well. I have to get by on my alchemy."

Astarte smiled at her, "It's great. I think the shop problems might have more to do with the name. It doesn't sound like a teashop."

"Not changing it." Alfar pouted, and just as quickly snapped up into happy mode, "I like tea with spice. That's why the name. Boring tea is boring. I don't like being bored. It makes me remember."

Astarte grinned, "Well, we'll certainly recommend the place. The bank manager talked to me about you. Said you were behind on payments."

Alfar winced, "Oh. I must have forgot. I'll have to pay today. Or they'll have sent dickwad to break stuff again."

Akheron responded to that, his eyes flashing. "The bank sends people to smash up your shop? Their investment? That seems kinda crap."

"Bank doesn't have money." Alfar whispered, "They get loans from the Hunter's Guild. They break stuff. They're not nice. Make Garmr angry. He ate the last one. I had to pay for that, too."

Both Furies looked nervously at the hellhound, who let out a low moan as if he was being ignored, and wasn't a giant war machine that had eaten a professional who spent most of their time hunting killers. Alfar rolled her eyes and tossed him a piece of a biscuit, "Anymore and I'll have to give you a proper bath."

The hellhound looked conflicted after it ate the crumb.

Astarte finished her tart, smiling. She really liked the elf. She was fun and playful, and twisted her brother inside and out. She could feel the ball of emotions that was in his head. He didn't like her, not yet. Yet somehow she'd made him open to the idea of one day having a girlfriend, even if he didn't realise it yet.

She really wanted to play matchmaker between the two of them, that'd be fun. For now, though, they needed to earn their own gold. Two hundred silver a week wasn't that easy to get. "Get any posters?"

Akheron shook his head, "Mike's wasn't open yet. I met Mikhael, he didn't think much of me. Also, apparently his elfin ancestry is taboo or something."

"It is!" Alfar exclaimed, clapping. "Garmr ate four people who attacked me when I first came. Four nights. First nights. I warn them that they'll give up. That everyone is scared of Garmr. But

not safe to be without him. They still attack. Guards, blacksmiths, anybody. Nobody likes me.”

Astarte winced, “I like you, Alfar.”

The elf smiled at her, “I like you too, Assie. You’re a good friend.”

She did not like the nickname, but had a feeling that it was going to stick no matter what she said. She tossed a tart crumb across the room to the hellhound who eagerly ate it. “We should get moving, get to work. I’ll come by tomorrow, see how you are. Is that okay?”

Alfar hugged her quickly, “Just don’t bring jerkface. He’ll be rude.”

Astarte glared at her brother, who held up his hands innocently. He didn’t even realise when he was being rude. Though Alfar might really be meaning he would be rude to her in the future.

Mikhael

He finished putting up the new warrants, and the regulars crowded around. There really wasn't much taking for the day. Mostly ten coin quests. Taking out stray goblins and wolves. That sort of thing.

He headed back to the bar, when he saw someone he really didn't want to see sitting at a stool. Three copper coins fell in front of him and he shrugged, "A bit early for ale, isn't it?"

The man on the stool shrugged, "I'm paying."

That was true. If he got paid, he didn't much care what the person did so long as they didn't make trouble for him. Unfortunately, this particular person always made trouble for him. They were scarred, head to toe, and hid the mess of their face underneath a cowl.

They were who the Hunter's Guild had decided to send after the resident eccentric's hellhound had eaten the last couple hunters who tried to hurt her. Unofficially, the eccentric elf had been labelled offlimits. A hellhound was one thing nobody was willing to take the effort to fight. The elf paid, she just tended to forget, because her head was in the clouds.

He poured the glass and placed it in front of the man. He didn't say anything, though he did want to ask. He wanted to know why the bastard was back, and whether or not it was going to mean problems for him.

"Heard the Twins moved in across the ways."

Mikhael relaxed a fraction, "Akheron stopped by. He should be back soon enough to take a look at the warrants."

The man glanced up at him, white eyes shining out of the hood for a moment. The Hunter's representative nodded slowly, "Will you let him?"

Mikhael winced, "You know I don't want to get caught up in things. If the Vizier says he can, he can. I haven't heard different than that yet."

The man nodded, without showing any concern, one way or the other. That was the way of things with people like this. They burned you for answers, gauging every reaction you made. If you weren't what they wanted, they eliminated you. Killed, kidnapped, discredited. Whatever worked best in their favour.

Yet, they gave you none of the same respect. They knew where the power balance lay, and made sure you knew it as well. They were the ones making the choices, you just kept breathing so long as your voice made sounds they appreciated.

The man sipped his ale, and Mikhael breathed a sigh of relief and went back to caring for the tavern. There were always tables to wipe, orders to take. Anything to distract him from the brooding figure and the danger he posed. All it would take is one greenie, and the entire place could explode into violence and wanton destruction.

One of the waitresses paused near him, and he walked over casually, turning sideways to her and beginning to polish some of the glass. He could tell she wanted to say something, but didn't feel comfortable doing it.

"Mike, there's a dog outside the door."

That was all he needed to hear to completely ruin his day. There weren't many dogs in Adairoft. Most were scared off by the presence of just one. The day it had arrived, the Vizier's hunting hounds

had chewed off their feet to escape their shackles and make for the hills. The scent of it was enough to make everything run.

Mikhael suspected that the presence of this one animal was why Adairoft hadn't seen a goblin attack in years, despite being right on the edge of their Wildlands. There had to be a shaman or three out there, but none had dared to try and attack the humans in their homes. Farms, yes. The farms outside the walls had been attacked. Attacked so frequently that most were abandoned. But the walls themselves had only seen human attacks in recent years.

He turned to the bar, and whispered quietly to the silent figure, "Alfar is outside. I'm guessing that she's here for you."

He looked up slowly. Not in surprise. Not in expectation. That would mean giving away one of his thoughts. The price of his thoughts was well above what Mikhael could afford to pay.

The man stood up and nodded, "That wouldn't surprise me. She's late again."

Mikhael winced, "Is there going to be a problem?"

"No." The man replied, being uncharacteristically generous by soothing his nerves, "I don't mind the hellhound."

The last statement was more like it. What kind of sane person didn't mind a weapon of mass destruction looking at you like you might be a treat. Especially when it would attack the moment it perceived you were upsetting the rather anxious elf it called 'master'.

Alfar's head peeked in the door, "Not you. Him."

The elf had always refused to step inside the tavern. Mikhael wasn't entirely sure of her reason, but he was grateful for it. He didn't need his place being known as the place in town that beastkind could feel at home.

The Hunter sat back down to his drink silently, apparently unconcerned.

Mikhael glanced at her, "Who, elf?"

The adventurers went silent, the entire tavern staring angrily at the innocent face in the doorway. Most had been unhappy when she'd turned up in town. Most bore scars from her damned dog. However, it did mean they would show restraint. Few wanted to pick a fight with her again. Not when she just stood there giggling and trying to tell the hellhound to stop chewing a limb off.

"You." She replied with surprise, like it was obvious.

Mikhael screwed up his face, and then walked out slowly, "Make it quick, elf. I have customers, and they might make a -"

"Shut up." She said, her face falling to a pout, "You need to actually listen to me, for once, Mikhael. Son of Fagstar, son of Alfreth."

Mikhael cringed, "Shut up. I don't need you spreading that around."

Alfar smiled up at him, "It already is. That's why the man's here, today. Not me. He's watching you, bartender. Wondering what it would take to close down your home. He will know your heritage. Soon."

He flinched. So that was the game. If Mike's Tavern closed, then the Hunter's Guild could move in with less opposition. The adventurers would flock to them, for the stability if nothing else. It wouldn't matter if the tavern reopened, most would stay with them.

"What's in it for you?"

Alfar blinked in surprise, “You’re a friend, Mikhael. We fought goblins together. Lay by the fires of the fields.”

He scratched his head, “No. No we haven’t. No we aren’t.”

The elf looked at the ground and kicked, “Eiden. I forgot. It’s next. Soon. But not yet. Be careful, Mikhael. My hundred years are up. Peace was an illusion.”

“Zanfir and Falenthia are right on the edge.” Mikhael laughed, “Peace isn’t something where you can taste the tension in the air.”

“Zanfir and Falenthia are pathetic.” Alfar growled, pulling back a strand of her hair with irritation, “Empires mean crap all. Not compared to the Sins. They won’t survive if they oppose them. They’ll be defeated if they kneel.”

Mikhael took a step backwards, “Look, I’ve guessed you can have visions or something. I suppose most people have. But are you telling me that the empires will collapse? We’re not far from the capital. Armies will charge through here, first.”

“They will.” Alfar shrugged, “But they won’t win. The Sins are coming. I was at Shahr during the Godless Night, Mikhael. I fought. When gods walked amongst men and elfin and killed them without a thought. When Zanfir was driven back so far they nearly lost their foothold on the continent. A half dozen people turned an army back. If you think an army is a concern, then you have not seen anything yet in your life. But you will.”

He coughed nervously, “You’re beginning to scare me, elf.”

“Good.” She snapped, “Scared stays alive. Stays moving. Fearless stops to think. Fearless gets its teeth kicked in.”

Mikhael cringed, “So, something bad is going to happen. And I’m going to get caught up in it... And somehow, trying to close down my tavern is the catalyst?”

“The Twins were the catalyst.” Alfar smiled to herself, “But we need them. Astarte is the clever one. Akheron is a jerk. But useful. Ask him, if you like your ear being talked off, what the word ‘ex’pa’ means.”

Mikhael shook his head, “I’m not liking this.”

“Good.” She turned, tossing a biscuit from somewhere in the ruffles of her dress to the enormous bulk of metal lying nearby. “Come on, Garmr. We have customers.”

He watched her go, and felt like she’d just walked over his grave. And told him about it.

Akheron

His sister had gone to arrange horses and weapons. Most would be loan equipment. They'd left most of it behind in Ozandius, too afraid of being tracked by the paladin. Their own magical signatures probably still stood out like a sore thumb, but most people struggled to keep a track of them for some reason.

He tried to blend into the crowd as he saw the elf up ahead, skipping along without a care in the world, whilst the black metal beast lumbered along behind her. Even Hero had known to fear the hellhounds. He'd had most of them dismantled soon after their creation. Yet this elf didn't see a problem at all.

She scared him. Especially by how much of his future she might know. He didn't mean to be rude to her. She didn't mean anything to him, that was all. Maybe she expected her to mean more to him. He still wasn't sure about her calling him her boyfriend. It might just have been a ruse, she certainly was sane enough to lie. The problem was, he didn't know which timeline she was seeing when she spoke.

In the near infinite parallels of time, it was possible that they were, or would one day, be boyfriend and girlfriend. There had to be another version of Akheron who actually liked people. Appreciated them.

That wasn't this timeline. He was certain of it. Which meant her acting like that wasn't the case was upsetting. Too upsetting. Until he could work out why she had him so emotional, he would avoid her.

"Whatcha doing?"

Akheron swallowed nervously and turned, seeing the elf cross-legged atop the hellhound. He closed his eyes, "Eh. Modesty?"

He heard her laugh, and the sound of her skirt being pulled down. He looked back up at her, and she giggled, "Not like you haven't seen it before."

Akheron glared, "Yes, yes it is. I have never seen your bunny underwear before!"

He'd said that louder than he intended. He could see people turning to stare. He sighed heavily. This wasn't exactly the way he wanted to start out his new career here. He wanted to be known for his magic, not for accosting an elf in the street.

Alfar laughed to herself, "Sorry. I forget. Have we had tea yet?"

"Yes. You served me dragon's claw, for the first time." Akheron sighed, "You said you kept it for me."

She nodded, "It's hard to get a hold of. The Hall of Hells being gone. Only a handful of mages managed to cultivate it. Good for healing. You like it when you get stabbed. Alexis likes it, too."

Akheron winced, "Alexis is dead, Alfar."

"I know." The elf smiled at him, "It's easier to see at the moment. The timelines are converging."

"Fuck." He swore, "That's never good. Why? What fixed event?"

"The Sins." Alfar said, her smile vanishing. She didn't look cute anymore. She didn't even look out of place. She looked as down and angry as most of the people on the street. "They're coming, Akheron. They're here. They were here tomorrow. I'm scared. You have to fix it."

He didn't know what the hell to do. How does one comfort a total stranger who doesn't think that they're a stranger? By the gleam in the hellhound's eye, he had to do something or be eaten.

"You have the Hellbound Twins on your side." Akheron grinned, "You'll be fine. Astarte will never let anyone hurt someone she considers to be a friend."

Alfar glared at him, "You were supposed to hug me."

"I don't know you." Akheron snapped, "Why are you torturing yourself over this? I don't know you, Alfar. You're one of my muk'to's friends. One who watched her die. That's a part of my past that hurts. It will always hurt. Why would I want a constant reminder of that?"

Alfar looked down, and he knew he'd gone too far. She was crying. His shoulders slumped, "You say you mean something. That we're friends. Maybe one day. Just give me time to get there, first? Please?"

She glared up at him, "The tree! Did the tree mean nothing to you!?"

He shook his head, "I don't know what you're referring to. Has it happened yet?"

"No." The elf said, spinning around, "I suppose it hasn't. Go blow up some wolves, dick."

Garmr leaned forward and let out an angry growl, and then turned, knocking Akheron off his feet. He dusted himself off, watching as the two moved off through the crowd. He felt extremely confused.

"She's right. You're a dick."

He glared at his sister, "You could have intervened."

"Nope." Astarte laughed and punched his shoulder, "If you're going to get the girl, you get to make the mistakes all on your own."

Akheron rolled his eyes, "I don't even want the girl."

"That'd be your first mistake." Astarte giggled, and then her face went serious, and she held out a piece of scrap metal to him, "Loaner."

Akheron took it, and sighed. It wasn't weighted right. It had a crack in it. It looked more like a lump of metal than an actual sword. "Crap. Let's get paid."

Astarte nodded, putting an arm around his shoulders as they began to walk out of the city, towards the tavern, "I can't believe you hurt her like that, Akr. I know Alfar can be confusing, but surely you realised telling her she meant shit to you would make her cry."

"She's two hundred." Akheron rolled his eyes, "Surely she's been hurt before."

Astarte stopped him, turning his shoulders, "You fucking dimwit. Elfin don't tell anybody their age. Ever. Did Alfar tell you how old she was?"

Akheron winced, "Yes. Two hundred and... Seventeen?"

"Don't tell anyone else." Astarte instructed, "Let's put it this way. You know how uncle Trei and Alphège were nearly a thing? She only told him her age once she gave him the elfin kiss, the resurrection spell meant only for true love."

"I don't think it was like that." Akheron shook his head, "Does she seem two hundred to you? She's an elf, but she doesn't look quite that young."

Astarte slapped him.

Akheron blinked, seeing stars, "What the hell?"

His sister glared at him, “I can’t believe I have to spell this out to you. If a girl says she’s younger than she is, go with it. It is as sensitive a topic as her weight, dickhole. Geeze. When I was courting kings, what were you doing? Seriously. You should have at least picked this much up.”

“I’m not interested.” Akheron growled rubbing his cheek, “Now, can I go blow some shit up already?”

“Fine.” Astarte laughed, “Alfar recommended a wolf quest, didn’t she?”

Akheron nodded slowly, “I guess she did.”

“Then we’ll take the advice of the all-seeing elf.” Astarte replied drily.

Alfar

She hadn't mean to see him again, not yet. She'd meant to meet him after the hunt. To commiserate, and let him see her as a person. Instead she'd made the same mistakes she remembered that she would make, tangling herself up just as much as him.

It wasn't fair. Why did she have to be the one to remember kissing him? He was a monster. Heir of the Fury. It had meaning. It made them awake. He would hurt her. Break her heart. What they had wouldn't last, and she knew it even before he knew who she was.

It wasn't worth the price. That fleeting happiness they shared in their eternal lives was not worth the way he hurt her, the way he broke her heart in his cruel and heartless manner. He was a jerk, right up until the end. When he died in her arms. After she killed him.

Alfar stopped pouring the tea. She knew she should, she had customers. But right now all she wanted to do was curl into a ball and cry. Her hands were shaking too much to do the pour. It hurt, and it annoyed her.

Why was she cursed to feel things over and over before they even happened? To feel things the entire world had long forgotten about? She was still crying over Dyys' death when her kids showed up. Children she knew would hurt her more, because they would understand her. That though they'd been alive different lengths of time, they were the same age.

"Alfar?" A timid voice asked, and she wiped her face quickly, trying to put on a smile, "I'll be right with you, Mabeline."

The hunter walked around the counter, and hugged her, "Hey. What's got you so worked up?"

Alfar rolled her eyes, "Akheron. Worst boyfriend ever. He doesn't even remember me yet. I have to. I have to remember him breaking up with me, and he hasn't even asked me out yet."

She stopped, her lips trembling, and felt the hunter hug her tightly. She didn't understand fully, of course. Mabeline was just a kind-hearted hunter with a taste for rare teas from the West Continent. There weren't many people who could get a hold of them. Alfar visited with her dog every now and then, and always remembered to buy some. Well, mostly.

Mabeline pulled back, "Feeling better?"

"No." Alfar pouted, "But I can make tea. You're my customer. You should sit."

Mabeline laughed, wandering back, "I never thought I'd see you so torn up over a boy. Most people around here treat you like a kid. It's hard to work out just how old to treat you."

Alfar rolled her eyes, "You can't compare me to a human. I've lived my whole life, every moment of my life. I'm old and young and nothing all at once. If I was a normal elf, I guess I'd be equivalent to a twenty-something year old human. But I'm not. So I'm both more and less simultaneously."

Mabeline smiled at her, "I guess remembering the future messes with your maturity a little. How old is Akheron?"

"A little over a hundred." Alfar shrugged, "Young adult. Just now discovering he can have a life of his own. He's been killing since the day he was born. Before he even had his first meal. Furies are different. Akheron being a hunter doesn't mean much. A Fury toddler could be a hunter, and it wouldn't be a bad thing. Growing up is when he remembers he can be more than just a killer."

Mabeline smiled slowly, "When he realises he likes you?"

“Part of it.” Alfar said, blushing, as she poured the tea, “Just below boiling point, jasmine, two days old.”

The hunter took the porcelain and sipped it slowly, “I don’t know how you do it, Alfar. It’s perfect. As always.”

Alfar shrugged, “I visited Huan Guo a couple days ago. They always have jasmine in the bazaar. Its a happy sort of place, if poor. They’re paying Zanfir, after a failed invasion.”

The hunter laughed, “Yeah, most people can’t just skip between nations.”

Alfar grabbed a treat from a shelf and tossed it across the room to the dog lying in front of his fireplace. “Garmr is a good boy. He makes it easy. Only thing that can skip easier than a hellhound is Akheron.”

Mabeline noticed, grinning at her, “Seems he’s on your mind. Do you like him?”

Alfar sat down slowly, rubbing her temples, “That’s a rough question. I will love him, with all my heart. I will hate him with everything in me. I remember both. I don’t know what I feel now. Confused. He’s a jerk.”

Mabeline laughed, “A jerk for making you feel this way?”

“For what he did!” Alfar moaned, “For the Sins. I’m not supposed to tell you. Sorry. Knowing what’s next is dangerous. It hurts people. I try and not remember it. It doesn’t work. I forget.”

The hunter shrugged, “I’m content drinking tea here.”

“I know.” Alfar grinned at her, “You saved up. Not many jobs. Which is weird. The Wildlands should be active, but they’re not. They’re scared. Scared of him.”

Mabeline nodded, “I’ve been getting the feeling something is messing with them. Are the goblins massing for an attack? Or have they decided it’s too much trouble. We barely even get rogues at the moment. No bandits. Its weird.”

“It’s him.” Alfar sighed heavily, “Bloody Akheron. Everything comes back to him. They smell him. Smell the royalty on him. Don’t like it. It scares them.”

Mabeline blinked, “He’s royalty?”

“Not yet.” Alfar sighed heavily, “Doesn’t know it, either. Doesn’t like it when he finds out. Gets angry.”

Mabeline grinned cheekily, “I won’t tell him. Meantime, any suggestions for jobs? I’m getting sick of fighting wolves. They don’t play fair.”

“The troll.” Alfar shrugged, “Astarte could use some help. He’s angry. They find him an hour ago.”

Mabeline blinked and stood up quickly, “Shoot. I guess I better get over there, then.”

Alfar shrugged, “Sometimes you do, sometimes you don’t. I’ll make a fresh batch of tea when you get back. Instead of this one. For listening.”

Mabeline grinned and gave her a quick hug, “You’re my friend, Alfar. I’m always here when you need me.”

The elf smiled at her, and hugged her back, “Thank you. For now, the forest. Garmr?”

The hunter didn’t get a chance to react as the hellhound snagged her, jumping through the space to the moment when the hunter needed to arrive, to protect the twins. It was a moment

before this one, which was a bit of a cheat, but not by much.

Mabeline would find it exciting when she worked out Alfar had sent her through time. Astarte was going to be mad. She understood that time was delicate. Except it wasn't. Time didn't even exist. It was just a way of looking at things.

Astarte had also got mad that Alfar had sent a mortal into the middle of a battlefield that wasn't at all what the twins had expected. They walked in, expecting wolves. She was going to warn Akheron when she first served him tea that the mission would go sideways. He hadn't remembered it until the troll began tearing up trees.

She had seen them both tomorrow. She'd liked that. Astarte was a good friend. She liked her. She was also cute when she got mad. Couldn't control the Fury in herself, so her hair rose up, making noise like rattlesnakes.

It didn't effect Alfar. She wasn't mortal. She was eternal. An elf. Though she sometimes wondered if she hadn't been an elf what she would have been like. A mortal probably couldn't survive living beyond the abstraction of time and space.

Alfar tossed a pouch at the door as it opened. "Sorry. I forgot to give it to you whilst I was there."

The hooded figure weighed the pouch, counting the coins in his head. He turned his foreboding head towards her, "Feels light."

"Feels like you want to keep your balls." Alfar smiled back at him. Just because she was forgetful did not mean she was going to be intimidated by the Hunter's Guild to cough up. She didn't need their protection, and the Vizier wasn't mad enough to take her teashop away from her. Neither had ever happened.

The figure sighed heavily, "You make everything difficult. Don't you, elf?"

"I make tea." She replied with a shrug, "You make the violence. I don't like it. Don't want it. But you make it anyway."

"I'm good at it." The man replied carefully.

Alfar appeared sitting on the counter on the other side of the room, without moving at all. "I'm better. Please go away now."

The man jerked his head, "Showing off are we?"

She turned to him with an innocent expression on her face, a colour-freckled cookie sitting halfway into her mouth. She blinked at him.

The figure sighed heavily, "This is your last chance, elf. Pay up. Or I will begin breaking things."

Alfar shrugged and spoke around the biscuit, holding it with her hooked fangs, "You do it anyway. Tomorrow. I guess I'll break your arms."

Malis

She nearly spilled her tray as the two new adventurers entered the tavern, standing in the entrance. She quickly righted herself, but no one had noticed. Everyone was staring, like she had.

The brilliant red hair stood out. It also didn't hurt that both of them made her stomach tie itself in knots. She'd never been attracted towards a girl before. Now she was attracted to a woman, and her companion.

He was something else. His short-cropped red hair gave him a military look. He didn't seem old enough to have served, only a little older than she was. Yet, his eyes told a different story. They weren't human, and they were old. She'd seen that look before. Someone had seen so much it simply didn't affect them anymore.

He was the kind of person who could stand and watch a flogging, whilst eating a biscuit. Not because he was excited to watch it. Because he had seen so many horrors that another didn't mean anything to him.

These two looked like they were new adventurers at first glance. The woman even exposed her stomach. That was asking to be hurt. They didn't even have any decent armour or weapons. Yet, looking at the way they worked, the way they ignored the stares and went straight to the jobs board, they had seen work.

"Staring." Mikhael whispered as he walked passed her.

Malis blushed and spun around to grin at the customer at one of her tables, "What do you think of the new ones, Gant?"

The man had a series of scars across his face, from where he'd been slashed by an ork in a fight a few years ago. He was one of the more experienced adventurers, but also one of the more vocal haters of non-humans.

He smiled up at her, "Not nearly as pretty as you, Malis."

She cocked her hip and grinned, "Thanks, Gant. So, do you think they'll make it?"

He rolled his eyes, "The boys too pretty. Dead in a week. The girl might make it longer, especially if she wises up and drops that gig. She could have almost any man in town."

Malis sat on his lap, putting an arm around him, "Any man?"

Gant grinned at her, breathing a putrid mix of alcohol and rolled leaf over her. "I did say almost."

Malis grinned, and kissed the air near his cheek, intentionally teasing him by not quite completing it. "So what will it be?"

He rolled his eyes. Knowing that she wanted him to order, and if he didn't she drift away to someone else in her section of the tavern. He looked up for a moment and then sighed, "Menu sucks today, doesn't it? What do we have since Zanfir hit the last caravan?"

Malis smiled, "Not that bad. Oatcakes, pancakes, beer bread or beans."

Gant looked at her, "You're not nearly pretty enough to excuse actually liking oatcakes."

She took one of her legs behind his, smiling innocently at him. "Just nostalgia, I suppose."

"Too young for that." He laughed, and shrugged, "What have we got to go with the pancakes?"

"There's a bit of honey, if you're sweet to me." Malis grinned at him. It was true enough.

There was a tiny viperbee hive out the back. None of the others could approach it without being stung, and Mikhael had decided not to get rid of it after he found out she could.

Gant smiled at her, “Honey? I haven’t seen any in a month. How sweet do I need to be? Ten coins?”

Malis pretended to pout, “Not like that. You can’t buy this girl.”

That was a flatout lie that made her heart dance. Hopefully he figured that was because of the flirting. She didn’t extort her customers always. She had to keep them loyal, to her. That meant sometimes giving them what they wanted, at least sometimes.

Gant frowned, “Where did an exotic beauty like you come from? Most dark girls I’ve met were Zanfirian. You don’t have the accent.”

She didn’t want to tell him her skin was dark because her father was green. That was a sure fire way to get stabbed in the throat, violently. Gant was the kind to keep beating the body long after it had stopped breathing.

“I was born in Parjan, to the south.” She shrugged, “Don’t know my parents, sorry. I’ll just have to be your little mystery.”

Gant laughed, and shook his head, “You don’t have to be so nice to me, Malis. I’m not actually a nice guy. Getting your attention once in a while is good enough. I’ll pay a bit extra. Can’t let Mike get annoyed at you.”

Malis stood up slowly, and curtsied, and then she dashed forward and kissed his cheek. It was something they’d been taught at the training house. A way to disarm a man, make him think that he owned you, even if he wasn’t your master.

The veteran adventurer was taken by surprise. It was fun to watch him melt, like all of them always did. She didn’t fully understand the way it felt for them. She assumed it was similar to the way her stomach flipped whenever Mikhael smiled at her. She hadn’t been taught that. The techniques, not the reason behind them. That was what the training school had provided.

She moved off to get his order. There was only one other person in her section, and she was putting off talking to him. He terrified her.

It was the scarred man. The one from the Hunters’ Guild. He was quiet, and he always watched her. She was sure he chose to sit in her section. She didn’t know why he chose her, but he had. He drank and then he left. All he did was watch people. Her, especially.

Unlike the others, she didn’t give him any special treatment. She didn’t encourage him. She didn’t want his attention.

“Pancakes for Gant.” She said, entering the kitchen and breezing passed the cook to go talk to the viperbees.

Charity

She shivered, pulling her silks tight around her. This was not the nice, warm and welcoming teashop that she'd expected to find behind the door. Which was, of course, exactly what she should have expected. That elf never did a damn thing you expected of her.

Davos placed a fur-lined cloak around her, summoning it without her asking. He was always like that. Always had her best interests at his heart. Without question.

"Where do you think she's sent us, Davos?"

The butler drew some sigils in the air, and twirled the magic circles around them, and then repeated it in confusion. The man turned to her and scratched his head, "We are in the mortal realm, where humans usually dwell, but we are not on either the West or East Continent."

Charity sighed, and looked around some more. There was snow, and wind, but it didn't feel like she was breathing at altitude. The ground was flat. In fact, it was soft.

She bent down, and reached through the snow. She sighed heavily, "Sand. Rough grass. This is an island. Is the snow and wind, magical?"

Davos did another spell, "No. No, this appears to be... Different. A sudden and rapid change of climate. The cause itself might be magical, there is certainly a magical presence somewhere near here, apart from us."

Charity considered fixing the climate. She could probably try to. But her magic was living, and it always took off in crazy directions. That was what being a djinn meant. She didn't really want it to wreck her or Davos.

"Whereabouts?"

Davos scratched his chin, doing a series of more complicated magics, and then turned to her and shrugged, "I believe the best way to put it is, 'not yet'."

Charity blew a strand of her hair aside, "So, we're getting nailed by a storm because some sucker is going to end up here at some point? Sounds like the elf sent us here early."

"She may have assumed it would take longer to get you out of bed."

Charity shot a glare at him, but smiled. That was fair. She was the laziest of the nine. Sleep was just so tempting. Sleep, food and sex. Those were the top three things she enjoyed, and she'd been living it up for a hundred years. Breaking away from it to this kind of thing was irritating.

She shrugged, "What do you feel like? A tent? Or a cabin?"

"This island doesn't feel particular stable." Davos replied, looking down at another magical circle he'd created. "Whatever we create might end up getting flooded."

Charity grinned, revealing two rows of perfectly white teeth, almost human, except for the top two canines that descended and covered the bottom row. "Stilts! Oh, it's been years since I've had a decent cubby house!"

She didn't wait for him to response, letting loose a small green spark, containing her desire, her wish. The magic hit into the ground with a burst of light and sound. The wind swirled around, wiping the snow away as four pillars grew upwards, before a platform appeared above them, and then a ladder grew down to meet them.

Charity grinned at her butler, who waved a hand suspiciously, "It appears safe to ascend."

She rolled her eyes, and then scampered up the ladder, before crashing into the tiny cabin. She already knew the drawback. It was a cubby, which meant it didn't really have insulation, and was still freezing cold.

She reached into her home, and dragged out a heavy blanket, and pinned it to one of the walls, and then turned around and sat cross-legged by the gap that served as a window, looking out at the island, hidden in the falling snow.

Davos carefully lay out her pillows as a bed behind her, and then stood in the hole that was the doorway, and frowned, "It does seem confusing that you would have been brought here, so far from the rest of the world. Alfar might make mistakes with time, but not like this."

Charity sighed, "I'm meant to be getting ready for whoever it is, Davos. They must be quite scary if I'm supposed to face them alone. I assume it must be one of the Sins. I don't think a mage of this era would be capable of gaining that much power. The matrix of the world is... Damaged. There isn't as much to go around."

He nodded. He had to assume she was right. Davos' magic didn't come from the lifestream, or the matrix connecting the lifestream to the distribution of mana in the world. His magic came directly from her, and her magic was her own.

Djinn were infernal. They had been residents of the Halls of the Hells, once. Servants of the Golden One, who turned out to be the human warrior-king, Hero. Too angry to die. The Halls were gone. Destroyed in the Godless Night.

Most of her people were gone. When the Halls collapsed into the Void, there had been no warning. She'd heard them die. Screaming, and alone. She couldn't help them. She'd still been trapped in the home that Hope had arranged for her. Yet, she had enough magic to peak at the world, to see what was happening.

She also had enough of a sense of things to begin to grasp what might be about to happen now. This was the price of defeating Pheter. The gods wouldn't be allowed to act, the world was on its own.

Which was exactly what her little group had been assembled for. For when the power of a god was necessary, but there wasn't one to be found. United, they had the strength to decimate any army. Their combined knowledge, skill, strength and magic were very nearly unmatched.

"I'm worried about Mercy." Charity said quietly, and Davos sat down beside her, putting an arm around her shoulders, "She will be okay. Most of the others were put under sleeping spells, that carried a preservation with them. Mercy will not have aged."

"Everyone she knew will be dead." Charity winced, looking distressed, "Her whole family is gone. Even her grandkids could be dead by now. Humans don't live very long. That has to hurt."

"She's Mercy." Davos replied calmly, "She is not Wrath. She is the one who stops anger in its path. She may hurt, that is true, but she will always be too strong to knock down by something like this. You can take everything from her, and Mercy will stand there, smiling, and offering you more."

Charity grinned at him, "Does somebody have a crush?"

"Inspiration, not infatuation." He replied, "There is good reason that Mercy is one of your leaders. Her ability to turn defeat into victory, is something I am somewhat in awe of."

Charity laughed and then kissed his cheek. Davos sighed heavily, "You want to christen your new home, don't you?"

She blushed, looking away, “You don’t have to say it like that. We have some time to kill, that’s all.”

Davos laughed, “No, mistress. That is not all. You’re jealous of how I look up to Mercy. Irritated that I haven’t sung your praises. Shall I?”

“I’m already embarrassed!” Charity exclaimed, turning back to him, and then freezing. Davos had unbuttoned his shirt, revealing the muscles and scars underneath that she couldn’t help but touch.

Her hands traced one of the scars gently, extending almost the full width of his body, and she swallowed nervously, “I left you there too long, didn’t I? I’m sorry. I should have summoned you sooner.”

“I am not supposed to exist.” Davos grinned, “I was supposed to die in the Void. Having to return to it every so often is not as bad a curse as often accompanies your magic. I’m grateful.”

Charity kissed his chest, hating herself. She and her poor control of her magic was the reason he still got hurt. When he was forced to return to a place in between the Void and reality. A crack of malformed things that had never quite existed. A horror far worse than the ten circles that Hero had reigned over.

Davos pulled her up, so she was sitting in his lap, and put his arms around her. His eyes sparkled as he smiled at her, “I know that you don’t love me, and never will, mistress. All the same, I adore you. No other girl is going to replace you in my life. I swear it.”

Charity grinned, one of her incisors peaking over the edge of her bottom lip, “You’re sweet, Davos.”

Then she kissed him. He didn’t get to think. He was human, but she was not. Her sense of self flattened him and any of his desires like a building collapsing. His emotions were forced to match her own. There wasn’t a single human alive who could resist the kiss of a djinn.

She intoxicated him, driving his hormones into overdrive. Her tongue touched his, gently dancing, as she felt him trembling. Fighting the urge to tear her clothes away, and push her down onto the bed. Fighting and beginning to lose.

Charity broke the kiss, her pink eyes flashing as she saw the disappointed hunger in the man, and then she stood up, and lay down on the bed of pillows behind him.

Davos didn’t need any more of an invitation.

Temperance

There was a small town beside the lake where she'd woken up. She'd just had to follow the mark of frequent cart movements to find the people who had been stealing from her.

Rhara Bag.

It was a large city, making it easier to enter without being noticed. The Port was the obvious place to start. If they had been taking her gems, then they had been trading her gems.

She knew she should probably think about finding the others, but she had a feeling they would come to her, or at least a message would turn up at some point. Hope would not have left everything to chance.

She sat on a rooftop, dangling her legs, as she watched the ships being loaded. Below her was an alley, leading to one of the port's enclosed squares where business was thriving. Not all of it legal, but not all of it illegal either.

It was interesting to see how the technology had changed since her time, or hadn't. There were many new machines, and things that only something like her had been able to afford now seemed available to everyone. Apart from that though, the machines seemed basically the same.

Zanfir's bottled lightning brought the machines of madmen into common use. That was something she could appreciate. It was a kindness. However, like all things, it came with drawbacks and risks.

Handheld cannons on every guard patrolling the area, and many of the thieves. Weapons that could spit plasma and destroy a person without a chance to save their life. That rumbled against the idea of honour she held.

Perhaps she had finally become nothing more than a relic from another age. She had lived a long time. Perhaps the world was finally being born into a new age. That was something she could feel proud of. She might not understand the new age, and she might even resent parts of it, but growing was always something to be proud of.

"Wallet." A voice commanded, the sharpness of a blade pricking the itch between her shoulder blades.

She rubbed her back against the knife gratefully, and then smiled, "I can smell you a mile off, hafgoblin. If you want to cover that up, you'll need to be calmer on your little quests. The pheromones of a goblin are quite distinctive."

The knife jabbed harder, pressing against her scales fruitlessly, "Wallet! I don't care if I'm a mongrel. I've got the knife."

Temperance shrugged, "I don't have any gold or silver. That is what you use for currency, here, isn't it?"

"What, are you from another realm or something?"

She turned around, and he repositioned the knife to press against her face. She smiled calmly at him, "No. No I'm not. I'm from this one, but I'm old. Old enough to remember when coal was the currency. Old enough to remember when wood and meat were traded. When people like you, and like I, were hunted for our magic."

The boy tried to press the dagger harder, and suddenly realised it wasn't piercing her skin at all. He stared at her, "What the? You have dark skin. Like me. Are you Zanfirian? Goblin?"

Temperance smiled, “No. No goblins are young compared to me. I’m a wyrm, young man. If you stay, and chat for a while, I’ll give you some crystals. Not sure how much they’re worth, but I think they are still worth something.”

The boy stared at her, pulling back, and then sheathed the dagger. “I could run away.”

“I wouldn’t stop you.” She replied, and waved to the port, “There were very few cities like this when I went to sleep last. It is nice to see how civilisation has flourished. Not so nice to see that slavery still exists.”

The boy sighed, and sat next to her, dangling his legs over the building. “This is weird. Why do I feel like I can trust you?”

“A wyrm does not lie. Cannot.” Temperance replied, and shrugged, “However, we are still quite dangerous. I do not believe even these new cannons that seem so widely deployed would pose much of a threat to me.”

“That’s just Rhara.” The boy replied, “Most places only have a couple of the cannons, but they get made here. A smith in town stole the plans from a Zanfrian convoy that got caught up north a bit. He arms us first.”

Temperance nodded slowly, “An impressive feat of engineering. I wouldn’t mind talking to him, if he had the time.”

“He lives in the Dark Row.” The boy said, waving to the edge of the city, “Don’t go there alone. Everyone who tries, dies. People are desperate there. No protection from the wilds. Even trolls turn up every few weeks.”

Temperance glanced at him, “What’s your name, boy?”

“Don’t got one.” He replied, “Family tossed me to the street when I turned out black. Pretty sure my Pa killed my Ma for it too.”

She sighed heavily, “That is... Disappointing. Well, my name is Temperance. I am a wyrm, and though many of your people might think they can threaten me, think they can steal my gems from me, they are quite wrong.”

The boy looked at her in surprise, “Steal from you? I ain’t stealing gems. You promised.”

“Not you.” She smiled and turned and pointed at one of the ship anchored in the harbour, “See there? Those boxes. Filled with all kinds of gems. Quartz and ruby, topaz and diamonds. Do you know where they got them? I do.”

“A mine, down by the water.” The boy replied, “Just follow the guards.”

Temperance sighed, “Not a mine. A cave. The gems weren’t naturally occurring. Giant piles of the stuff, and sleeping atop the tallest pile, a blonde girl.”

“You’re a girl!?”

She rolled her eyes, “All dragons have a mane, except the naked ones. Don’t judge. Anyway, point is, they’ve been stealing from me. Because I was asleep. I don’t think I should let that go.”

The boy shrugged, “What can you do about it? The Kai rules on behalf of the king. He’s got the imperial backing. Those soldiers have seen a fight. All of them know how to use their weapons. You really think you can take a legion by yourself? You suicidal, old woman?”

“Young boy, watch.” Temperance smiled, and then she breathed into the palm of her hand gently. The wind swirled for a moment, and then there was a burst of screams and yelling from the

ship.

She crystallised the sails and rigging. It had instantly become too heavy, and began to come crashing down, tearing the ship apart. The sailors barely had time to evacuate before the ship lay as a priceless ruin in the water.

Temperance smiled, “How long do you think before your Kai realises that the dragon he has been stealing from is awake?”

The boy swallowed nervously, “No one is going to believe me. Heck, I saw that, and I don’t believe it. You turned the ship to diamond. How?”

“I don’t breathe fire.” She said somewhat tiredly, “Most wyrms don’t. Only one clan did. There’s lots of us. Myself, I control gemstones. Create them. Obsessed, sort of. The ones in my cave I didn’t make, I gathered them, over hundreds of years.”

The boy winced, “I guess it kinda sucks that the Kai has been taking them, then. It funded the war effort. Kept the town safe.”

“I’ve seen more than a hundred people get their purses snatched whilst we’ve been having this pretty little conversation.” Temperance stated, “You tried to steal from me, because you are hungry. A king with my wealth, shouldn’t have anyone who goes without. It is wrong.”

The boy blinked, “You’re weird.”

She breathed into the palm of her hand, carefully constructed the flawless diamond, growing it to the size of the boy’s fist. She held it out to him, “For you.”

He took it, and tossed it up and down, “This is kinda cool, but I’ll never be able to sell this. No one will believe it’s real.”

“That one was for you.” Temperance grinned, and then handed a small satchel of gemstones to him from inside the folds of her mane, “These are so you can eat.”

The boy opened it quickly, and then looked back up at her, “This is way too much. I tried to rob you.”

“And failed.” She grinned, “But you did listen. Take the gems, and go. Then listen again, because I am here, and this town will regret taking what was mine.”

The boy scampered off. She waited a long while on the rooftop, giving him time to sell what he wanted to. She watched the sun dip low to the horizon, as the town guards attempted to salvage the wealth of the sunken ship.

A messenger had gone to the castle, but one hadn’t come back yet. It seemed that her message hadn’t been loud or clear enough. Just fortune. Except, anyone who touched the diamond of that ship would be marked. She would know them. It was not good fortune, it was bad.

She stood up, stretching out her wings, and then let the sound bubble up from the depths of her gut. The roar started slowly, shaking the ground and windows of the houses, before exploding into a sound so loud it had the humans on their knees, covering their ears.

Temperance smiled and took flight over the town.

Astarte

Why had they taken the advice of the all-seeing elf? That was the question screaming inside Astarte's head as she ran for her life. If she was older, this might not be as big of a problem as it was. Except, she wasn't.

"Akheron! Tell me you have a spell ready!" She shouted, feeling the panic of her brother's emotions in her head.

"I've got the wolves!" She heard his voice distantly yell, behind her and the enormous troll chasing her.

They'd been sent to deal with a wolf pack. Ten silver coins. Barely anything, but there wasn't anything on the board that paid better. If Alfar said they should, then they should.

Except, it seemed that Alfar had sent them because it wasn't just a wolf pack. It was a wolf pack that had been adopted by a rogue troll.

Most trolls weren't bad. They kept to themselves, in their stone cities in the low valleys. Except, now and then a troll did go bad. It went out looking for trouble. Wanting to die. Most trolls turned to stone when the sun came up. Rogues didn't. That difference in them eventually drove them insane.

Like the giggling madman swing a tree in either hand behind her, sending shockwaves through the sparse forest of the Wildlands. There was nothing else here. Every living thing had already run for the burrows before they'd arrived.

She'd thought it meant that one of the wolves might have gone dire. Been infected with a trace of the Fel. It didn't mean that. It meant a bloody insane troll was behind her. With stone skin that their crap loaner weapons couldn't penetrate.

She never thought that she would want Akheron's ability to blow next to anything up as badly as she did right now. She'd tried a few spells. Fireballs and icicles did nothing. The troll was too old, hardened by years in the sun.

What she needed, more than anything, was a decent explosion.

There was a popping sound and a hulking metal dog twice her height came crashing down, holding something in its mouth. It dropped it, and then disappeared into the air again.

Astarte turned and grabbed the figure, pulling them to their feet, "Run!"

She turned and sprinted off again, except she heard the human behind her just burst out laughing. She turned, staring at the suicidal person as the troll approached them in disbelief.

The woman simply unhooked a bow from her back and drew a single arrow. Astarte went to tell her it was useless, and then decided against it. If the woman wanted to be a distraction, that was fine by her.

"Kao'el!" The woman shouted, "I offer you this calamity!"

Astarte took a double take, and then the arrow loosed. Except it wasn't just the arrow. Hundreds of other sprang up around it into the air. As the metal points struck the troll, they didn't bounce off. They exploded.

Astarte covered her ears, wincing as the boom shattered the air. She blinked. Her ears were still ringing from the impacts. And the troll was gone. Turned to dust.

The Fury stared in amazement as she walked over slowly, tapping one of her ears. She spoke, listening to her own muted voice, “What the hells was that?”

The woman hooked her bow up again, turning. “Trolls are hard to deal with. I guess Alfar sent me to help. She didn’t give me much warning... But I do really enjoy the look on their face when they realise I’m a champion.”

Astarte rolled her jaw, and looked down at the dust, “God’s champion. Kao, the goddess of chaos?”

“Yeah.” The huntress grinned, holding out a hand, “I’m Mabeline. Folks around here call me the Calamity.”

Astarte shook her hand, “That’s quite the moniker. Some of the elfin around here can remember the calamity.”

The huntress shrugged, “Most don’t come into the city. Too scared of being attacked. So, I guess you’ll want a part of this kill?”

Astarte sighed, “Yeah, but no. It’s yours by right. I don’t think I even managed to annoy him.”

The huntress pulled a bag from her side scooping up some of the dust, “So if the troll wasn’t what you were after, what was?”

“These.” Akheron’s voice spoke as he came into view, dragging two wolves behind him. “How much do you think they need for confirmation?”

Astarte shrugged, “Just take the alpha’s head, Akr. Oh. I’m Astarte, and this is my brother, Akheron.”

The huntress nodded, “The Hellbound Twins. You’re the talk of the town. Except... You couldn’t handle a troll?”

Astarte rolled her eyes, “My brother decided the wolves were more important. He could have finished him with his famous explosion magic. But he was busy.”

Akheron glared at her, “Oh whatever. Like you were in danger. You could have blitz’d him.”

“It.” The huntress corrected, “Trolls don’t have a gender.”

Astarte stuck out her tongue at her brother, and then spoke, “If I had blitz’d him, we wouldn’t have a Wildlands left. Work is shitty enough without freaking everything into running away.”

Mabeline raised an eyebrow, “You don’t need to show off to me.”

“She’s not.” Akheron sighed, “She’s right. I’m better at controlling the scale of an explosion than she is. Astarte tends to go overboard with most of her magic. It’s why she prefers a sword... But...”

Astarte held up the broken handle of her loaner, “Yeah. We need to get paid.”

Mabeline grinned, “Well. I hope I get to see what you can do, one day. For now, why don’t I walk you back? Sam’s on the gate. He’s a racist dick. He can verify your prize, and then you can sell the head to a mage or something.”

Astarte breathed a sigh of relief, and fell in beside her. “So, how do you know Alfar?”

“I have... Exotic tastes.” Mabeline said hesitantly, “I spent some time overseas. Not something I can say a whole heap about. I like their jasmine tea. Ours is bitter, compared to it. Alfar is the

only person I know who can get it fresh.”

Akheron smiled, “I could.”

Mabeline glared over at him, and Akheron vanished for a moment, before reappearing with a small pouch of it. Astarte glared at him, “Go give that back! We can’t afford to waste our coin by showing off.”

Her brother sighed, and disappeared again. Mabeline frowned, “A shimmer. That’s a shift, right?”

Astarte nodded, “Yeah. My brother and I have been jumping since we were toddlers. He taught me, much to my mother’s terror.”

“Where is she, nowadays?” Mabeline asked casually.

Astarte swallowed back the pain, “She died. The Godless Night.”

Mabeline winced, “Sorry. Wait. You were born before the Godless Night?”

Astarte shrugged, “Technically, during? I’m a bit over a hundred years old. Akheron is younger, by about a minute.”

He reappeared, shrugging from the exhaustion of disappearing over a continent. Shifting between the same dimension was harder than shifting between them. It required more smaller jumps, rather than just a quick long one.

Mabeline shook her head, “Wow. You look like you might be my age. Twenty or so.”

“I’ll take the compliment.” Astarte grinned, “Furies age differently. Fully grown within a month, and then eternal. Muk’to was twelve thousand when Pheter killed her.”

The huntress raised an eyebrow, “Holy shit balls. Are you messing with me?”

“Nope.” Akheron said bitterly, obviously upset they were talking about his mother. “Furies tend to live longer than elfin. We’re harder to kill. Heal faster. We don’t need a tree for that.”

Mabeline shook her head, “So, how do you know Alfar? She wouldn’t stick her neck out for most people around here. She’s nice, but she knows when she’s hated.”

Astarte frowned, “That’s... A matter of debate, at the moment.”

Mabeline laughed, “That’s Alfar for you. If you’re friends one day, she acts like it is today. She had a stash of tea waiting for me when I first came. Totally surprised when I told her I didn’t know what she was talking about.”

Akheron muttered angrily to himself, and Astarte couldn’t help but laugh at the tangle of emotions in his head. He was probably complaining that Alfar had called him her boyfriend. He wasn’t over it, and he didn’t know why he wasn’t.

It was cute.

“She called me Assie.” Astarte shuddered, “Terrible nickname.”

“It’ll stick.” Mabeline laughed.

Astarte grinned, “I figured. Do you have an idea how she ended up with the hellhound?”

“Rebuilt him, herself.” Mabeline shrugged.

Mikhael

He felt the familiar rumble of explosions sounding off all at once, and looked up at the kill board. He mused over it slowly, and hung his name tag under ‘troll’.

The other regulars came up to place their bets on what Calamity had killed this time. It wasn’t that easy, to be honest. There weren’t that many things that needed her attention at the moment. She hadn’t even come in to see the wanted posters.

The hooded man was sitting at the bar again. He’d left for a short time, and come back. Mikhael was guessing he was in a bad mood. The man didn’t show many emotions, but he was speaking even less than usual, and he was drinking a fair amount. Enough that Mikhael was tracking when he’d have to stop serving the man.

A maximum of ten pints a day. That was the law. It was more than most ever drank, but everything had a ration limit these days. That even included the plentiful alcohol that was so ridiculously easy to make.

“Do you do food?”

Mikhael glanced at the man, “Nah. Don’t have the ration chips for that.”

The chips were something the local Vizier had introduced. A way of controlling what businesses could sell what products. You had to pay to serve your own product. Food would have required dozens of different chips. It just wasn’t worth it.

The only person who bothered to get more than one or two chips was the elf, but she seemed off her rocker most of the time, so it was entirely in keeping with her character.

The man nodded with what Mikhael assumed was disappointment.

He hadn’t forgotten Alfar’s warning. He didn’t like the elf, and was mostly just scared of her and her war machine. But it rarely paid to ignore the warning from a prophet, no matter how mad they were.

It was possible that the man was here looking for any weakness, any infraction that could legally be used against him. Which, unfortunately, was quite a lot. He’d taken plenty of coin on the side for things which he wasn’t technically supposed to do.

The Vizier let him get away with it because he paid his taxes. The man got his cut of the illegal profits, so wasn’t immediately inclined to put Mikhael up in the stocks. Mostly it was small things. Gambling, a beast fight or two. Selling a few things with dubious ownership. Nothing obviously illegal.

He didn’t like the thought of how much his profit margins would shrink with someone looking over his shoulder, with a dagger in one hand. Things would get uncomfortable, quickly.

“Why so nervous, Mike?”

He turned, and sighed heavily. “You’re Hunter’s Guild, right?”

The man nodded, barely perceptibly.

“You want to take my patch.” He said, waving at the wanted posters.

To his surprise, the man nodded again. “Yeah. We do usually chase the competition out before we move in. Not this time. Well, maybe.”

Mikhael leaned in front of him, “You have my attention.”

“We have a problem.” The man shrugged, “Take care of it, and we’ll let you keep this place. In fact, we’ll make it the officially sanctioned place of the Guild. We’ll drop a rep here, and you’ll get a cut. More than you do now. Twenty percent.”

“That is generous.” Mikhael nodded, “Way too generous. Is this problem impossible to take care of?”

“Probably.” The man smiled. It was the first time Mikhael had seen mirth on that scarred face. “It’s the elf. We want her gone. Out of this town.”

Mikhael nodded slowly, “Well. I guess I need to close down. I wish you luck. I have a sense of self preservation. Having the Guild pissed at me is a death sentence, probably. Having her irritated slightly with me is worse.”

The man looked down at his ale, “Yes. It does seem that way. I’m supposed to raze her shop tomorrow. Burn it to the ground. Does the Vizier permit funerals when there is no body?”

Mikhael shrugged, “We could always wait until the hellhound passes you.”

The man held up his glass, and then drank it in a single go. He slammed it on the tabletop, “I survived the Harrowing of Bocheon, you know. Ten legions, and the city burning. Didn’t stop me. I still killed my target, and escaped alive. I was at Baghestan when the idiot mage brought a burning rock down out of the sky and destroyed the castle beneath my feet. It was like the wall was liquefied into a boiling mess. I escaped basically unscathed. I was never afraid. Not until that bloody dog growled at me today.”

Mikhael shivered, “It isn’t a dog. It’s a godsdamned hellhound. I don’t think anyone would let her have it, if it didn’t eat anyone who even tried to suggest it. She just dances around like the world doesn’t matter.”

“She’s worse than the dog.” The clearly drunk assassin replied, “I’ve looked into it. She wasn’t just in the city during the Godless Night. She was with them. She was with Trei’el, and Aurili. She fought beside them, against Pheter. How the fuck does that work? An elf fighting beside gods? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Mikhael shrugged, “Nothing much made sense back then.”

“It gets worse.” The assassin replied, letting out a belch, “The elf has friends in high places. Did you know?”

“I assumed the Vizier liked her. Or at least tolerated her.”

The man shook his scarred head, the hood threatening to peel back and reveal his face, “Nah. She closes the shop for something called game night, once a week. She always has the same two guests. They drink tea, and play cards.”

Mikhael winced, “Do I want to know who she plays with?”

“Aurili and Lilibeth.” The assassin said, cringing. “The pink-eyed devil queen, and the white-eyed fury of war. How do you play cards with the god of godsdamned motherfucking war?”

Mikhael felt his throat nearly close. If any other adventurer came to him with this, he’d disregard it. But not from a representative of the Hunter’s Guild. They checked things, thoroughly. No wonder the man just wanted to get drunk. He didn’t want to live to see tomorrow, when he would have to pick a fight with the elf.

Mikhael filled the empty stein, “On the house.”

The assassin raised his glass to him, and then downed it in a single go, before collapsing his head onto the bartop.

Akheron

“This your girlfriend, too?” The guard spat. “Or is she another sister?”

Mabeline smiled sweetly at him, “Sam, did the gods piss in their own breakfast when they created you? If you’ve got a death wish, just go ahead and tell us. Adventurers do like to get paid for their work, true, but I wouldn’t mind killing you for free.”

The guard hesitated, looking at her. Akheron got the feeling that her being called the Calamity wasn’t entirely to do with the awe-inspiring attack she had shown off earlier.

Sam sighed heavily, “Fine. Adventurers. I see the head. Show me the warrant.”

Akheron pulled the bloodstained paper from a pocket, and the guard made a face as he stamped it. “That’s rank. Keep it clean, next time.”

“Choke on a dick, next time.” Mabeline replied, and then shoved the guard back.

Akheron didn’t say anything as they entered the city. He didn’t want to give the guard any extra excuses to hate him. If this was what it was going to be like every single time, then he wasn’t sure he wanted to deal with it. He’d collect payment at Mike’s instead.

Except he needed to sell the wolf’s head. It was worth something to a mage. Not much, but something. They’d spent most of their coin on the farm. The repayments were going to keep them strapped for a while. If the huntress was willing to show them a few tricks to stretch their coin, he wasn’t going to complain.

Mabeline waved at a nondescript building. There wasn’t even a sign to indicate it was a store. “Go ahead. We’ll wait here.”

Akheron shrugged and hefted the blood-stained sack on his shoulder. It wasn’t because of the weight. It was just a nervous twitch. The building was dark and dusty. He wasn’t even sure if there was anyone living in it.

A small voice whispered, but he couldn’t place where from. It wasn’t speaking in his head, but it seemed to have no physical location either. “What do you offer?”

“The head of an alpha wolf.” Akheron sighed, “Fresh. That something you’re interested in?”

“A moment.” The voice whispered. So he was dealing with a middleman of some sort, then. Whatever it was had gone to check with a master.

A light blinked into existence nearby. Akheron turned his red-glowing eyes, and saw the man holding the staff jump in surprise. It was a mage, a low level pyromancer of some kind, by the sigils poorly emblazoned on the rough brown cloth.

The mage smiled weakly, “Wolf’s head?”

Akheron shrugged the sack from his back, “Right here, mage. Don’t worry. They didn’t get their wires crossed. This Fury is a free man, not for sale.”

The mage coughed nervously, “A male Fury. I hadn’t heard they existed.”

“They don’t.” Akheron glared, “I’m the only one. Akheron is my name.”

“No names.” The mage shook his head, “Sorry, Fury. Adventurer. The organisers like to keep things... Anonymous.”

So, this was a black market then. Awesome. He’d been in the city for one day and he was already breaking laws.

“Head of an alpha.” He said, opening the sack.

The mage’s nervousness evaporated as he scampered over. He made thinking noises as he moved around the fur, checking the eyes, ears and the wound where Akheron had torn the head off. “No sword marks. Very clean.”

Akheron closed the sack, “Make an offer.”

The mage waved a hand, an accounting book appearing beside him. He ran a finger across it, muttering to himself. Akheron could hear every single syllable. The man could barely count, and was counting wrong. Underestimating how much coin he had left after expenses.

“Two silver pieces.”

Akheron shrugged the sack onto his back, “Goodbye.”

“Wait!” The mage exclaimed, “I can negotiate! Four!”

Akheron turned back, and nodded, “Five.”

“Four and two coppers.” The mage said bitterly.

Akheron put the sack on the ground, “Done.”

The mage nodded, and held out a hand with the coins in it. Akheron picked them up, and passed a quick magical glance over them. “One of these is tin.”

He instantly heard the whisper, “No shortchanging. No breaking deals.”

The mage went white in terror, “I didn’t know it was counterfeit! Here, this is silver, right?”

Akheron passed him the tin coin, but it evaporated into the air. He guessed it was the middlemen. He took the proffered silver, and pocketed it. He waved, “Pleasure.”

“Wait.” The voices whispered.

He paused, and turned. The pyromancer was gone. Probably back to whatever tower he’d been summoned from. It was a summoning. He could taste it in the air. A curious, but effective, measure for making sure clients weren’t tracked.

Akheron shrugged, “What am I waiting for? Or do I owe you a cut?”

A robed figure appeared with a flash of blue lightning. The man dusted himself down, “No cut. The mages pay for the privilege of this anonymous service. Rather, we like to inspect any new purveyors. Do you expect to use us, often?”

Akheron shrugged, “Maybe. I need the coin.”

The robed figure nodded, “Of course. We offer no judgement, only payment. Can I ask how you heard of us?”

Akheron hesitated, “An adventurer. Can I say her name?”

The robed figure nodded, “There are no clients present. You are permitted.”

“Mabeline.”

The figure seemed almost surprised, “Ah. The Calamity. She has never brought us another hunter before. You must be quite skilled. In that case, we might have a job, if you’re interested. Every now and then, we offer them, to our more skilled providers.”

Akheron frowned, “I need a bit more than that.”

“Once a contract is formed, we expect it to be fulfilled, by whatever method you deem necessary. The product must come intact, and be of high quality. If you fail, you will still provide the necessary product.” The figure shrugged, “Hence why we don’t tend to offer these jobs to newcomers.”

Akheron sighed, “Maybe. I’m an expert in explosives magic. So intact might be difficult. I’d have to know what I’m hunting.”

“Now a what, but a who.” The robed figure replied. “We are interested in procuring a heart. I cannot give more details with acceptance, for obvious reasons.”

Akheron winced, “Yeah. Can’t help you there, sorry. Alfar is a friend.”

The robed figure again seemed surprised. “You guessed that easily. Might I ask how you heard of this contract?”

“I hadn’t.” Akheron shrugged, “But elfin heart is used in necromancy. She’s the only one around, and protected by a hellhound. Wouldn’t surprise me if someone put a price on her head.”

The robed figure nodded, apparently satisfied. “We hope to assist you again, in the future, Akheron. You may leave.”

He disappeared with another flash. Akheron traced it with a glance at the way the magic arc’d. The mage had come from the castle. So this little magical black market had unofficial support at the top. He supposed that was unsurprising.

Alfar

She smiled, standing on her head, looking at the last embers of the fireplace. She didn't know why she was standing on her head. She just remembered doing it. It was fun.

What had just happened was not fun. It was disappointing. Sad. It made her feel uncomfortable. Like she'd just killed a bunny or something.

She flipped upright as the window smashed, catching the flaming bottle and sending it back outside, where it crashed into the perpetrator, catching them alight. They didn't panic, and they didn't run.

He pulled the cloak off, and tossed it aside. He walked towards the door, drawing a sword as a spell turned the door to dust. That made her a little mad. It was hard to restore things that were so well disintegrated.

He stabbed towards her with the sword, and she flipped over it, grinning. Cartwheeling in the air was fun. Made what would happen less cringeworthy.

Garmr growled behind the attacker. He was good at that. Always offering a warning towards them. Giving them a choice before he ate them.

The man held up a bag, and the hellhound whined, backing away. Alfar looked at the attacker sadly, at his scarred face. She could remember it before the flames. He had been a cute kid. His soul wasn't so cute now. His aura was as putrid as the Fel-infected dismembered hand in the bag he was holding.

Alfar's foot slammed into his nether regions with the full force of an elfin kick. Before his knees had folded in she'd grabbed his shoulders and slammed her head into his face as hard as she could.

She backed away, rubbing it. That had hurt. She picked up her hot tea and sipped it, smiling happily. The assassin struggled to rise when a paw gently rested on his shoulder and not so gently flattened him into the ground.

Alfar picked up the tree-shaped cookie, looking at it sadly. She didn't like this kind of cookie. It made her think about what a jerk Akheron was, but they didn't sell well. She needed to eat what didn't sell well. She couldn't just eat the good ones.

The assassin began to raggedly gasp, and Alfar pouted. "No killing, Garmr. He needs to talk to us."

The hellhound whined in disappointment, but stopped pressing down as hard. She sipped her tea. At least she could have nice tea without costing herself the earth. The tea leaves were practically free on the other continent. Everyone grew a plant in their backyard.

"Say... What?" The man gasped.

Alfar shrugged, "Dunno. Something interesting, maybe. I'm bored. I was hoping for more. I remembered it like this, but I didn't want to believe it. You're supposed to be some slick killer. Right?"

The man shrugged, "You have a hellhound."

Alfar rolled her eyes, "Garmr wasn't the one who kicked you in the nuts. I warned you. I warned you that you'd lose your balls."

The man squirmed, "I remember something like that."

"And break your arms, too." Alfar nodded, "I will promise that, didn't I?"

“Can we not?”

Alfar blinked, “Of course we can. Can is everything, and everything is nowhere. That’s what possibilities mean.”

“Can... I sit up?”

“No.” Alfar glared, and Garmr pressed down just a bit harder, his tail wagging. “You were rude to me. Don’t like that. It’s annoying.”

The arrow shot through the broken window, and Alfar spun catching it easily. The arrow burst into flames and she held up her hand, looking at them dance. They were pretty. “Your mage isn’t terrible.”

The man shrugged, and Garmr pressed down angrily. Alfar shot the dog a glare. It pouted, but relented. She smiled at the mage in the dark street as they tried to run away.

She took a step, appearing behind them and stabbing the arrow into their back. The mage screamed in agony and went down. Alfar picked them up easily and walked back into the shop. She tossed the mage in front of the fire, and frowned, “You like dark tea, don’t you, Ali?”

The mage gasped raggedly, bleeding everywhere as she pushed herself up onto her knees, “What? I just tried to kill you.”

“But you’re cute.” Alfar said, blinking. “I’ll make you a black tea. If you’re nice, Garmr won’t eat you.”

She turned back to the assassin, “There’s one more surprise, isn’t there? I remember something else. I don’t remember. What was it?”

The assassin didn’t say anything. He would have to be stupid to do so, after all. He wasn’t stupid. He was extremely good at his job. It was just that killing Alfar wasn’t possible. Not this way.

She knew when she was going to die, and how. These pathetic mortal-level attempts weren’t going to do anything. She remembered all of them, and could stop them with barely an effort at all.

She smiled slowly, “Oh yes. You will poison my tea, this morning. That’s right. Whoops. I nearly forgot. That’s okay. You can’t actually poison me. I’m an elf.”

Ali glared at her, “What? Elfin can get poisoned.”

“No.” Alfar shook her head, “Elfin get poisoned. Not me. You can’t poison me.”

She nodded to Garmr, “Let him sit up. If he doesn’t play nice, you can eat him. I don’t like him. He threatened Ali.”

The assassin coughed blood, his chest completely broken, half a dozen ribs poking out. He looked at her with his blind eyes, and smiled weakly, “Orders are orders, elf.”

“And jerks are jerks.” She shrugged, “Don’t care. That’s boring. Why did you threaten Ali? I like her.”

“She’s quarter elf.” The assassin wheezed, “Made it so she would work for me. I didn’t think you’d see it coming.”

“I see everything.” Alfar rolled her eyes, “Eiden, I hate explaining that. Everything means everything. You don’t get to surprise me. I remember when you killed the pigeon, Tan.”

The assassin winced, “You know me?”

“Everything is eiden everything!” Alfar snapped, and Garmr leaned forward, opening his mouth slowly. She glared, and the dog eased back, pretending he hadn’t been about to bite the head off the man.

The assassin smiled weakly, “Then you know why I can’t stop.”

“Nope.” She shook her head, “You died. Don’t you remember? Oh. Sorry. I forgot. It hasn’t happened yet. No matter. If you give Garmr a treat, then you can go.”

The assassin staggered upright, and fumbled with the jar of treats by the door, tossing one to the dog. Garmr ignored it and let it bounce off him onto the ground. He growled.

The assassin staggered through the doorway, and Garmr happily devoured the treat.

“Poison.” Alfar shook her head, kneeling down beside the mage. “A poison arrow. That wasn’t very nice, was it?”

Ali winced, “Surprise, an arrow, a spelltrap, and poison. I figured you’d forget one of them.”

“Clever. But stupid. Clevid.” Alfar said, and then yanked the arrow out of the woman’s back. She screamed, falling forward. A rough tongue that was nearly as wide as her licked her back.

Alfar grinned and patted Garmr. “We like you. You’re nice. Don’t be clevid again.”

The woman coughed weakly, and sat up, “I can’t go back. I’ve broken a contract with the Hunter’s Guild.”

“No worries.” Alfar shrugged, “They decided not to come after you, all things considered.”

“What things, Alfar?” Ali asked, looking at her in pain, “You?”

“Part of it.” Alfar shrugged, “More the crisis. The Sins. They’re here in the morning. Or one of them. It’s scary. I don’t like it. I’m scared. He broke my window. Will you stay?”

Ali blinked, “You want me, who tried to kill you, to stay? Because you’re scared?”

“She’s coming.” Alfar moaned, tears springing into her eyes, “He ruins everything. Can’t you stay? I don’t want the nightmares.”

The mage sighed heavily, and rubbed her back where she’d been stabbed, “Who is he or she? Why’ve they got you more scared than the Hunter’s Guild? I don’t remember ever seeing you scared to tears of anyone.”

“Can’t say her name.” Alfar shivered, “She hears it. Always. She listens. Listens backwards. I don’t want her to know me. She will, but I don’t like it. It’s scary.”

The mage softened, “Okay. I’ll help tuck you in. I’ll sleep by the fire.”

“Thank you.” Alfar smiled sheepishly, “I’ll light the fire for you, earlier.”

Malis

She curled up on the cold mat, wrapped only in the shirt that Mikhael had loaned her. She should be sleeping. Usually she'd have fallen asleep instantly, exhausted. Tonight was different.

She could the whispers. So many frightened whispers, everywhere. She didn't want to hear them. She hated that she could hear them. Hated the part of her that wasn't human that let her hear spirits in other worlds.

Why could she hear them now? It wasn't fair. She was a monster. Magic was an abomination. It was tolerated, because it was useful, but that was it. Mages were slaves of the capital. She didn't want Mikhael to sell her, to become a weapon.

She wanted to stay here. To smile and dance as he watched her.

Frightened tears ran down her face, mingling with the snot as she sobbed silently. She was good at crying silently. That was something the training house had made certain she knew. She never cried in front of a master. Not under any circumstances.

But when it was dark, and quiet, and she was by herself, she cried. Her chest hurt as it shook, as she let all the fear out. The hate. She hated herself. Why did she have to be a monster?

She knew why her mother had abandoned her. It was obvious. The goblin had raped her. To the faceless woman, Malis was the spawn of hell. She was just a reminder of what would probably be the most traumatic experience of the woman's life.

The same blood that hurt her mother ran through her veins. The same blood that let her hear the spirits. That gave her the magic that let her speak to them. Bind them to this world. That's what she'd done.

She wanted to scratch her wrists. To pull and tear until the blood was gone. Until this wasn't her anymore. She bit her lip. It was hard to resist the feeling. It wasn't just a thought. It was a compulsion.

She raised her hand to her snot-covered face and bit it, feeling the calm flood over her slowly. She was okay. Mikhael didn't hate her. He was being there for her.

If she just ignored the whispers, learned to tune them out, then she'd be fine. She didn't have to be a shaman if she didn't want to be. It was her magic. If she didn't want to use it, then it just wouldn't happen.

She was human. Completely human. She was just a normal human girl, and that is what she would always be. This is where she belonged. The bracelet on her wrist, binding her to her master, that was what she was.

Mikhael treated her like a human, which meant she was. All of this was just temporary. She was going to be fine.

The whispers were increasing in volume. They were coming from everywhere. Not just the quiet and mindless sound she'd heard last time. They were insistent, and closing in around her.

She clapped her hands over her ears and curled into a ball.

"That's not how it works, girl."

She flew upright, grabbing the shirt and pulling it down in front of her, "What?"

In front of her was a man she could only describe as intensely handsome. It wasn't just good looking. There was a pressure when you looked at him, pressing down and trying to suffocate you.

From his windswept black hair, to the impossible darkness of his eyes that tried to swallow you up.

He grinned at her, "Sorry for the surprise. I'm a spirit. A celestial. Not really a god. It seems you've got the attention of the spirit world. You connected with them, and now everyone wants to connect with you. Everyone wants your contract. I'm here to walk you through it. I'm nice like that."

Malis glared at him, "So you walk up on a mostly naked girl?"

He shrugged, "Not my fault you sleep in practically nothing. Name's Daitis by the way. What would yours be?"

She swallowed nervously. She knew that name. He was a Fate. One of the three that advised Trei, and his pantheon of gods. If she got on his bad side, then the rest of her life would be a living hell. There would be nothing she could do about it except beg forgiveness.

And she'd already been rude to him.

"Malis."

Daitis sat down in front of her, crossing his legs. That feat alone impressed her. He was wearing skin tight black pants, and they hadn't torn at the manoeuvre. "That's an odd name, for a Falenthian. Doesn't it mean something like bad luck?"

"Yes." She swallowed nervously, "The training house assigned me the name. Because of my heritage."

"The shaman in you?" He grinned and waved a hand, "Who cares. You rock on as you, girl. I'm looking forward to seeing what you can do. Who you'll choose."

"I don't want it."

Daitis blinked, looking at her in surprise, "Huh?"

"I don't want to be a shaman." Malis said tightly, balling her hands into fists, "I didn't even want to be part goblin. I don't want any of that. Can't you just make it go away? Make me normal?"

"You are normal." He said slowly, as if confused. The Fate sighed heavily and shrugged, "Look, I can go away... But this won't. It's better if I walk you through it. If you have to hate yourself, pretend all this is a dream tomorrow. But for now, I really need you to understand some of this."

Malis sighed heavily. If it weren't for her training she would be crying and punching the wall. She was upset, and she was frustrated. She was also terrified that there was a Fate in front of her. There was no arguing with what he was. She knew he wasn't lying.

Daitis smiled, and shrugged, "So, here's the deal. All the spirits are a bit interested in you. They liked how nice you were. Kind. But, you're not a match for all of them. I wouldn't pair you with me, for example. I'm a bit rash. A bit violent. I'd end up dragging you into some war or crap."

He flicked his hair, trying to get a strand to stay out of the way. "So, I've picked out a couple spirits that might be up your alley. Gentle things. All spirits can bring a punch if it matters, but these guys tend to be less inclined. How does that sound?"

"I don't understand." Malis said meekly, shaking her head.

Daitis blinked, "Huh. Basics? Okay. You're a shaman. You connect to the spirit world, like a kind of channel. Unguided, this stuff is dangerous as shit. To both sides. So, you make a deal

with a spirit. You'll do stuff they want, and in return they'll guide you. Make your magic safe, and better. They'll gift you new powers and crap like that."

Malis swallowed nervously, "Do I have to? Really? I'll just hate them, and they'll hate me. I don't want this."

"Kid." Daitis stated firmly, "This shit has to happen. It is going to happen, whether you like it or not. The spirit will give you some leeway, but sooner or later you have to realise you're a shaman. You're supposed to have a celestial buddy."

She shrugged angrily, staring at the edge of her mat.

"So, anyways. Three contenders. All three of them want you to be a defender of the weak, the unprotected, and the enslaved. I thought you'd like that."

Malis scoffed, and looked up at him, "Defender of the enslaved. Do you see the silver bracelet?"

"Inscribed with moon seals." Daitis replied, "Luna would have been pissed about that, mortals using her magic for this crap. Oh well, she's dead. So. If you choose one of these three, and you see something, you have to step in. If you don't, then you'll get punished. If you do, you get rewarded."

Malis glared at him, "Seems being a shaman is a lot like being a slave."

Daitis smiled, "I don't make the rules, honey. I'm just letting you know what they are. There's give and take. It's a relationship. They'll let you know if you've hurt their feelings. And when you do something they like, they'll spoil you."

Malis rolled her eyes, "I don't have a choice in it, do I? Get on with it."

"The first one, Aurili, will grant you crazy strength for a short time, on demand. The second, Kao, will grant you a magicbreaker. Spells cast at and around you, for a short time, won't work. They'll fizzle out. No rebound, they just don't exist anymore. The third, Hera, will grant you hellfire. Ability to summon these black flames that completely thrash most things." Daitis shrugged, "The choice is yours."

Malis swallowed nervously, "The god of war... The god of chaos... And the god of love... All want me? To serve them?"

"Shaman don't serve, sweetie." Daitis grinned at her, "A shaman is an equal. A business partner. You get to talk back, without fear. To tell them no, if you don't agree. All that jazz."

"That makes it more terrifying." Malis said with irritation.

Daitis smiled, "I told you, all the celestials want your attention."

Malis sighed heavily, looking down, "Magicbreaker sounds interesting, I guess. Though, isn't Kao'el supposed to be really... Unstable?"

"She's chaos, honey." Daitis laughed, "She's also a sweetheart. Well, if you want to make this deal, then make an offer to her."

Malis felt uncomfortable, not quite sure what he meant at all. "Uh... Kao... Would be interested in being... My spirit?"

She fell backwards. If it wasn't for her training, then she would be screaming her lungs raw. The pain stretched across her entire body, making her arch as it felt like lightning burning through each of her nerves, all at once.

She felt a hand brushing her forehead, but she couldn't see anymore. All her senses were disappearing, blocked out by the pain. A voice spoke right at the edge of her hearing, "Relax. You

need to accept me, not fight me. Let me in, Malis.”

She didn’t know how to do that.

She didn’t understand.

Charity

“I’ll call all this bit, ‘Mania’. The rest can be ‘Order.’” Charity nodded, looking at the town, and she turned to the exhausted man lying on the bed.

He was still tired, but she’d found it invigorating, enough that she’d built an entire town up and out of the sand and snow. A town on stilts, with walkways between the buildings. The people who lived here would never need to touch the ground.

“I think... I’ll call the town, ‘Davosi.’”

He sat up quickly, blinking his eyes, “Wait, what?”

“You’re the mayor.” Charity nodded firmly, grinning at the way he squirmed. She wasn’t joking with him. She didn’t do that. She’d built a town on this isolated island, so far from the world, and he would be in charge of it.

“Ninety seven villagers.” Charity continued, “They’ll be your responsibility. But we won’t get bored, now. Not that I mind being bored that much. You’re always entertaining. It seemed like the right thing to do.”

“Isn’t this island claimed by some kingdom?” Davos said, walking over to the edge of the cubby house, taking in the size of the village she had created just for him.

“I guess.” Charity shrugged, pointing to the flag that was now lying half-covered in snow. “I didn’t recognise it. I don’t pay a lot of attention to politics.”

“That’s... Zanfir.” He said with a wince, “Zanfir killed me, Charity. They were the ones who burned my home to the ground, before you pulled me out of the Void.”

Charity smiled, her incisors peeking out again, “Oh good. I was hoping I could meet the ones who didn’t mind slaughtering an entire town. It feels good to be out of that thing. Free to explore this world.”

Davos looked at her cautiously, “You’re not a god, Charity. You can’t go around making towns and people. It won’t end well.”

“I’m not a god.” She nodded, “I’m the next best thing, Davos. That is what I was born to do. To be one of the Nine. We’re what you get when you need a god, because gods never show up. They have their own agendas and timelines. But we’re here. When we’re needed.”

Davos glared at her, “Sometimes, I wish you weren’t like this.”

Charity’s eyes shot wide open, “Oh, fuck!”

He barely realised his mistake before the magic poured out of her. She couldn’t even resist as it spiralled up around her, and she had no idea what the living magic was about to do. Davos couldn’t have been more vague.

She saw him watch in horror as the magic began to unmake her. As her skin flaked off into the air, vanishing like dust. Her muscles were unwound and the fibres plucked apart. She continued to watch him see her as her soul was pulled apart.

Piece by piece.

She couldn’t scream. Her larynx had been stripped apart and was gone. She didn’t even have much of a physical form left. Soon enough she would cease to exist. That was the easiest way to make her not like she was. To make her not be.

How could he have been so stupid? They had been over this, time and again. It was the most basic rule of having a relationship with a djinn. You never, ever, wish for anything at all. That word was banned.

She'd made him just about black out, and this was how he repaid her. By erasing her altogether. It made her angry. Extremely angry. She was generous, but this was way too much.

Her voice split the air, screaming, as she dragged the pieces of her soul back together. Her will, her desire. Her magic hitting the living threads and killing them off, one by one. He wanted her to change? This was a change.

The spell gave up, seeing her as new.

Charity fell to her knees, glaring at the ground. The spot in front of her smoked as her anger bled out into the world, and she stood up slowly, turning to face the man that had very nearly succeeded in erasing her from existence.

"What. The Fuck. Was that, Davos?"

He winced, "Sorry. I wasn't thinking. Are you okay?"

"No." Charity spat, "I just had my soul stripped. Would you be okay if I ripped you apart, spun you around and rearranged you?"

He didn't say anything. He had no words to defend his actions. He should have known better. He was stupid enough to not just make a wish, but a vague one.

She had a wish.

"I wish that you were back where I found you." Charity growled. She regretted it instantly, as she saw him vanish. It was a specific spell, but still had some leeway to go wrong. She didn't care.

She wanted to not care. Except she'd just sent him back to a hell that nobody deserved to live through. He had been kind to her. Playful, and loyal.

Charity punched the wall of her cubby, causing splinters to fly in every direction. She sighed heavily. It hadn't been satisfying. It didn't undo what she had done. What she had done, by acting outside of her nature.

So that was the kickback of that wish.

Which also meant she couldn't undo it easily. He would lie in that shit, rightly blaming her, when it was his wish that had put him there. She had failed to control herself, to think things through. He had failed to keep his trap shut.

Charity hated it when there was no one to blame.

This was one of those things that she'd grown to rely on Faith to fix. When all else failed, she was always there for them, unless she was dead. Which happened often enough.

Fuck.

Temperance

It seemed the humans still remembered the fear of having a dragon fly above their heads. On an instinctual level, it terrified them into action. Forced them to flee indoors, protecting the things they cared about. Only the brave took up weapons. The rest scattered.

She let out another roar, building it deep within her before unleashing it and making the air cringe in terror. Making the ground shake at her memory. Even the waters seemed to be trying to recede.

She came crashing down in front of the castle, wings at full spread, tail balancing her easily. She glared at the small crowd of knights, holding their swords in trembling hands. Toothpicks in the hands of children.

She relaxed her wings, curling them up, straightening, "I am the frostwurm, Temperance. Now, I am a little pissed with your Kai, but I'm willing to talk. Are they?"

One of the knights dashed towards her, and she sidestepped around him, tapping the back of his hand gently with her fist. Not as gentle as she'd meant. He crashed to the ground unconscious. That couldn't be good for him.

Temperance tried to smile, but she knew it probably wouldn't look that way. A giant beard, and a mouthful of fangs designed to rip flesh, did not make for a very convincing smile. "I am quite serious about it being talk. I am a wyrn, we do not break our word. The Kai will not be harmed whilst I speak to him."

The soldiers exchanged nervous glances, and one winced, "We... Have orders to kill you. No matter what. If we don't, we'll be killed."

"Ouch." Temperance sighed, "Because, you are not dragonslayers. Sorry. That's a fact. I am quite patient, and quite in control of myself, but I'm afraid I'll accidentally kill you if you attack. There's only so much a girl can do."

"You are not a girl. You are a beast!"

Temperance looked up at the figure on the parapet, overlooking them, "Hello. Would you be the Kai?"

"What foul business has brought a beast of your nature upon us? What failures of faith of my people have summoned you hence?"

"Yours. Actually." Temperance replied, "See, you've been stealing my gems. I know I was asleep, but that is not something any wyrn would tolerate. You took my treasure."

She could see a small bead of sweat appear on the Kai's forehead, hear his heart accelerating. He was aware of his guilt. He was also planning to lie.

"Kill the beast! She's come to steal from us!"

Temperance rolled her eyes, and launched herself into the air, landing on the edge of the parapet whilst the Kai fell backwards, scrambling away in terror. She sat there in a comfortable crouch, using her tail for balance, and crossed her arms, "I'm patient. I'm not, however, completely without the nature of a dragon. You took something from me. That makes me feel all sorts of anger, and I don't enjoy that feeling. People usually die when I feel it."

"The Guild insisted."

She blinked, cocking her head, "The truth. Who is this Guild? I've been asleep awhile."

“The Hunters’ Guild.” The Kai winced, “Adventurers. They hunt criminals and animals that get out of control. That sort of thing.”

“The beginnings of law.” Temperance nodded slowly, “Corporate law, but law. Perhaps I have judged your people too harshly. They have sought to improve themselves whilst I slept. Where can I find this Guild?”

“The blue roof, in the Narrow Grove.” He said, swallowing nervously.

Temperance felt a dozen arrows thud uselessly off her back, tearing at her shirt. One even bent a buckle on her bra. That was irritating, but nothing more. She smiled at the Kai, “Be aware, if you are trying to mislead me in some way... I can just knock down the walls of your castle. You can’t actually keep me out.”

The man nodded nervously.

She backflipped off the parapet, making sure to crack the stone as she did. She spun in the air, wings unfurling. Unfurling and immediately being struck with useless arrows. Seems the mortals weren’t learning from their mistakes.

A small spurt of blue flames curled out of her mouth, striking just one of the archers sitting atop the wall. He screamed as he was instantly encased in a blue crystalline stone.

She flew away from the irritating bugs, and towards the port. She liked it there. The smells. The way she could see who was coming. It would be difficult to attack her there, if she nested.

She landed atop a building overlooking the harbour, and began to forge her home for herself. Diamond pillars running down the edge of the building, reinforcing it with a latticework that would be unbreakable.

The floor was made of studded stones. To a mortal, it would be something they’d stumble over, fall and hurt themselves badly. The stones were sharp, and pointed. To a wyrm, it was home. Comforting.

Walls grew up around her, spinning almost like a spider’s web as the grew together, stretching out icicles of frozen crystal. They interlocked, feeding into each other, becoming walls, but not smooth. Overlapping, sharp and straight. This was the home of something that preferred a cave, not a human.

In the centre of the room, blinking into existence one-by-one, were her gems. The ones that were left, anyway. She summoned them from her home, the ones that were left.

Temperance smiled and launched herself into the pile, spinning and twisting into the sharp objects comfortably. She adored it. This was one of the few privileges of being a wyrm that didn’t come with enormous and terrifying responsibilities.

People did always try and steal her treasure. That was people being people. A wyrm that had sat for a few hundred years always had a pile larger than those same people could gather in their lifetimes. It was obvious that they would be jealous, and she’d generally been willing to negotiate with those kinds.

It was the thieves she disliked. She’d allow them to keep what they got, usually, but she’d also remind them in ways that would scorch itself into generational memory that the treasure of a wyrm belonged to the wyrm.

She knew where the thieves were, or at least one of their representatives, but if she knew adventurers, then she wouldn’t need to go out and find them. Every adventurer thought it was

worth a song or two to kill a wyrm.

If an adventurer managed to kill her, she would expect nothing short of a six-part epic play with full symphonic accompaniment. Perhaps one of the more famous writers of the era, or a young and rising star, to pen it.

She wrapped her tail around herself, settling, and feeling the urge to close her eyes. She might have been asleep for hundreds of years, but she was almost as lazy as Charity at times.

Her ears pricked as she heard footsteps outside, and the door slid open by itself, or rather by the magic she had bound to it. Revealed in the doorway was a terrified human woman, wearing an apron, and covered in flour. She was staring.

Temperance smiled at her, "Guessing below is your house?"

The woman nodded noiselessly, mouth wide open and ready to catch a stray fly.

"Sorry." Temperance said, "But, on the other hand, your bakery should be seeing an uptick in adventurers. If you sell tea, there will be plenty of beaten ones wanting some soon. I'll keep the noise to a minimum... Would you like me to pay board?"

The woman swallowed nervously, "You're a dragon."

"I did build the room myself, but it was your house." Temperance mused, "What would the equivalent of a couple gold coins a day sound like? Market will be flooded with diamonds thanks to the ship... Emeralds. I could pay you with emeralds."

"You really are lying on treasure. Do you sleep there?" The woman asked, obviously not hearing a word that the frostwyrms in front of her was saying.

Temperance nodded slowly, trying to catch her eye, "Yes. I am a wyrm. And this is my bed."

The woman smiled weakly, "Why are you... Offering thing to me? You're a dragon."

"Prefer wyrm." Temperance replied, "And I did co-opt your home. I'm not unkind, if a bit rude."

The woman laughed nervously, "There's a wyrm on my roof."

Temperance stood up, as slowly as she could, trying to not scare the woman, and she held up a small green emerald between the tips of her talons, and stepped over slowly, watching for reactions. "Here, how's this for today?"

The woman took it gratefully, eyeing it, "This could pay for all the income from my bakery, for six months."

"Daily." Temperance repeated, "What's the point of a magical wyrm if she can't spoil you?"

The woman looked at her, unsure whether to be terrified, or happy, and swallowed, "What do you want? Here?"

"The Hunters' Guild have been stealing from me." Temperance sighed, "I'll have to have words with them at some point. Once they realise they can't kill me. But actually, I'm mostly waiting for some friends. Don't worry, they're not wyrms. Mercy is actually human. She or Hope will probably be the ones to talk to me."

The baker very nearly fell over in shock, "Mercy? As in Mercy the Witchqueen of Zanfir?"

Temperance frowned, "Not sure about the title, but maybe. Is she in charge of Zanfir now?"

"No." The woman said, clearly rattled, "She disappeared about fifty years ago. Most people

don't remember, but I'm old. I was a little girl when she vanished. There were lots of rumours. She was terrifying. Defeating armies without casting a single spell.

I know people today don't believe it, but she conquered the whole of Yurk, by herself. No army at her back. She walked across the nation, and every single person she saw, when they saw her... They swore an oath of fealty. Without being prompted."

Temperance smiled and nodded, "Yeah. That sounds like Mercy. I wonder why she left Zanfir? At a guess, they were being violent. Threatening. Cruel."

The woman nodded, blinking back tears, "So many people have died... Senselessly. On both sides. Zanfir is bigger, but they don't have the strength to walk over Falenthia. They'd lose too much, lose control of what they have, if they tried it."

Temperance sat cross-legged on her pile, and smiled at the woman, "Mercy would never have let them try. It's in her name. Don't worry, my friends won't make a mess. We never fight, if we don't have to. And well... My scales are made of something harder than diamond. I've never met anyone who can make me fight."

The woman nodded slowly, "You're powerful, aren't you? I mean, I know wyrms are powerful. I'm still kind of scared of having one nearby. But, amongst your kind? You're confident."

"Confidence is a wyrm trait." Temperance laughed, "But yes, I am powerful. More than most of my kind. I'm special. Patient. With patience, came... Learning. Everyone else was just so intense about protecting what was theirs, and fighting their blood feuds... None of them have ever stopped to study, before. I did. I know more than any other wyrm I've met, and I've met quite a few."

"I've never even heard another wyrm being alive." The woman said, clearly surprised.

"Nidoghr still is." Temperance shrugged, "Apparently he was in Mishia when it fell. Which surprised me. I thought he was still moping in the Ozandian mountains. He's a pacifist, which means the others tend to dislike him. Almost as much as they avoid me."

The woman frowned, and then looked up, "Do you like bread? I have to check the oven... But, passing up talking to a wyrm feels... Wrong."

Temperance grinned and stood up, "Love it. And the conversation."

Astarte

She didn't want to get up. It was cold. So cold that frost had formed over her quilt. She was comfortable inside the quilt, where she could control her own temperature easily. There was no pre-warming yourself against the wind.

Her hair hissed, uncoiling, or attempting to. The knots were always terrible after a freezing night like this. They'd have to do something about the hole in the roof, sooner rather than later. Which would be a problem.

She'd been expecting to be able to earn more silver than this. Two hundred a week should have been easy for them to gather. At this rate, they'd need to do three or four jobs a day, which was far easier said than done. Killing things took time, to do it right.

They couldn't damage the creature too badly, or destroy the land too much. They couldn't disrupt the ecosystem. They couldn't wipe out their livelihoods. There was so much more risk here than she'd expected.

There should have been at least three bandit strongholds here, except they weren't doing anything. No attacks. No driving animals closer to the farms and capital. Nothing like that.

She really did not want to be indebted to the Hunter's Guild. Cleaning up after Akheron's last tantrum had taken forever. Not that she blamed him for it. Being told by someone who'd never been in a fight in their life that you were useless wouldn't go down well with her, either. Though perhaps feeding the head of the Ozandian chapter his own genitals had been a bit over the line.

She sat up, steaming the frost off her. She sighed. The sun wasn't up yet, but they needed to be. To try and collect on the warrants from yesterday that hadn't been collected. They could only guess what they were, but the five coin quests would be a decent bet. Nobody touched those, generally.

"Akr." Astarte spoke, stretching, "Come on."

"Ex..." He moaned, and she kicked him in the side as she walked passed, taking a small jar from the knapsack lying against the wall.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes. "What time is it?"

"Work." She replied, ignoring his actual question as she unscrewed the lid, "If you feel like eating sometime this week."

Akheron muttered and stood up slowly. Astarte flicked her gaze over him. Whilst he was a total asshole, he did actually have some decent assets. She needed to find an excuse to make him take off his top in front of Alfar. Maybe that'd be enough for her to forgive him for being so rude.

He glared at her, "What?"

"Just thinking about Alfar." She shrugged innocently.

Akheron glared, "Really. Is that why you're feeling like an imp?"

"Yes." She replied truthfully. Just because he was in her head, emotionally, did not mean he had any idea what she was thinking. He'd probably scream and start protesting if he knew. Like that wasn't a dead giveaway that he did care.

He rolled his eyes, "Leave it be, Astarte. I have enough problems trying to understand her without you trying to manipulate us."

She crunched on the fish thoughtfully, "So... You do want to understand her, then?"

Akheron glared and took the jar from her. She couldn't help but grin to herself. She was getting under his skin. He'd be thinking about it for the rest of the day. Now she just had to make sure they didn't fight the moment they saw each other.

Which Alfar had said they would, if he came with her to the teashop. Maybe she needed to make sure they met outside it. That could work.

"There's someone at the door." Akheron said slowly.

Astarte turned and opened it. Blinking in surprise as the person fell over. They'd been slumped up against it. She dropped to her knees quickly as she saw the dried blood. "How did we not smell that?"

"The place stinks of ratspiders and bat shit." Akheron said mercilessly, "She's got an arrow wound. Punctured under the third rib. Pierced her lung. How is she even alive, still?"

Astarte flattened out the huntress, "Just be glad she is. She helped us yesterday, now it's our chance."

Her hair flew into life, filling the entire cabin with a red glow as the snakes floated into the air, hissing. Her claws curled, sharpening, and she held the talons over the prone woman. "Dragon's claw. It's a flower. Rips the lining out of the gut if ingested. Probably burns like shit, but she isn't poisoned."

Akheron was suddenly standing outside, looking at the tracks. "This is a message, Astarte. For me."

She didn't argue. She was too tired for that. Holding a thread of life still whilst she inspected the body it belonged to was too much to do first thing in the morning.

"I could do with some more power." She snapped irritably, and the Fury turned to her, and rolled his eyes. "Fine."

She felt a trickle of her brother's magic. He'd always been stronger than her, faster than her. If he hadn't been so obsessed with doing one thing, he could have been masterful with a lot more.

Instead it fell to her to do the healing magic. Restoring cells was easy. Pumping blood out of a drowning lung without killing the patient was harder. Restoring lost neurons was hardest. Not impossible. Nothing was really impossible with magic, but it required an extensive knowledge.

Astarte flinched at the damage she found. "Screw it. Kao. She's one of yours. Care to help me out?"

Akheron looked at her in surprise. Neither of them had a particularly good relationship with the gods. Having an uncle who was one tended to kill the hype. She didn't think she'd ever said a prayer before. As far as prayers went, it was pretty pathetic. She had no expectation that the goddess would hear it.

Even if she did, it was Kao. The goddess of chaos. The embodiment of change. She wasn't well known for helping out when people wanted her to. She was usually too busy screwing around to do anything to help the small people.

A fractal pattern seared itself into her skull, and Astarte followed it numbly, barely aware of what she was doing. It was a magical matrix, but not like one she'd ever seen before. It was too complex for her to comprehend. She just hoped to hell she was doing the right thing.

She fell backwards, and the image was yanked out of her mind, preventing her from remembering it. She smiled, and waved at the sky. "Thanks, Kao."

It felt like the right thing to do. It also felt like she'd done it all wrong, and had somehow managed to do it in a way that was even more insulting than saying nothing at all.

She breathed heavily, wiping the sweat on her forehead that was already beginning to freeze. "Akr. You said something about a message."

"Yeah." He growled, "I don't know the connection to Mabeline, but Alfar served me Dragon's claw tea. It isn't a decent poison. No need to dip an arrow in it. Mabeline was obviously meant to be found dead by us. She was carried here. Bound with some kind of silencing spell. It wasn't just the stink."

Astarte sat up, "You think Alfar is any danger?"

"Maybe." He nodded, "You need to stay here. Mabeline might not be out of the woods yet. You're the better healer. And as much as I hate to suggest it, if they attack to try and kill us or her... You're better off against an organised group than I am."

She flicked her talons, and sighed, "Yeah. You're probably right. Don't take long."

He shrugged, "This is Alfar we're talking about."

Mikhael

He sniffed as he entered the bar. He knew the familiar smells. Stale ale, sweat and the wood of the tavern. Yet, rarely did it smell of blood. Certainly not this intensely. He rounded the bar quickly, a hand on the knife strapped to his waist.

He glared at the man bleeding onto his floor, “Gods. Why did you come here? What if that thing follows you?”

The assassin coughed, bubbling blood on his chest as he laughed. “She let me go.”

Mikhael sighed and crouched in front of him, “So what exactly do you expect me to do?”

“A drink before I die would be nice.” The assassin smiled.

Mikhael frowned, “There’s a few mages in town. They might be heal this.”

“No point.” The man shook his head, “The Hunter’s Guild will have me dead by the end of the day for failing. They don’t take it well. Especially not the elf. She’s pissed off someone very high up the food chain.”

He couldn’t imagine who. Alfar never intentionally irritated anyone if she could help it. She was the sweetest little cherub most of the time. You only got to see her terrifying side if you tried to hurt her dog. In which case burying yourself under a mountain was a half measure at hiding.

One of the veterans had managed to hurt Garmr a few years back, made the hellhound limp with a sore paw. The city had tried to have a funeral for him, but Alfar hadn’t let that pass. Nor did she let the man have a gravestone. When one of the librarians tried to record his history, she threatened to raze the entire city. That was when people realised that of the two of them, the hellhound was the less dangerous.

Mikhael sighed, “Well. I guess I’ll get you that drink.”

It wasn’t any of his business, and he didn’t particularly like having a man bleeding out on his floor, right before he had actual business. Better to get it over and done with.

The doors to the tavern flung open, and a woman with glowing red hair entered, a bundle in her arms. She laid the woman out on the bartop, “Sorry to intrude. And eh... Sorry that I have someone else who is bleeding? Do you have any honeywart? Or something like that?”

Mikhael winced, “Oh fuck. Mabeline? Yeah. Give me a sec.”

He dashed into the backroom, grabbing a jar of crushed honeywart. He’d cut himself more than enough times in his work to justify the purchase. Which had actually come from Alfar, now that he thought about it.

He moved back into the room. The woman rubbed a hand on her head, and he blinked in surprise as it dropped, becoming almost normal. Still a brilliant blood red, but more silky than... Whatever it had been.

“Crushed? I guess it’ll do.” She said, and opened the jar, “Sorry. Someone shot her with a poisoned arrow and then dumped her on our doorstep. The dragon’s claw has stopped her coagulating properly.”

Mikhael nodded. It seemed the right thing to do. He didn’t remotely understand. What he picked up from it that there was an archer who could get the drop on the Calamity. Which did not seem to fit what he knew of the woman.

The Fury mixed the crushed flower with something else in a small handheld mortar and pestle, and then applied the mixture to a wound on the side of the woman carefully.

She smiled and put it down. "Thanks. Mike, isn't it?"

"Mikhael." He shrugged, "Mike is what one of the serving girls calls me. The name stuck before I got a sign. You're Astarte, aren't you? One of the Hellbound Twins?"

"Gods I hate that name." She screwed up her face, "But, yeah."

Mikhael nodded, and then sighed, "Well, uh... You can hang out here, I guess. I need to get ready for the day. Ignore the idiot bleeding out. Says if he survives the Guild will kill him today, anyway."

Astarte glared at him, "Those are crush wounds. You attacked Garmr."

"Alfar." The assassin choked out, "Yeah, I know. Stupid. Orders are orders. You don't get to say no to the Guild."

"I have." She shrugged, "Twice. Paying the blood price was... Expensive."

The assassin made a choking laugh at that.

Mikhael turned his attention elsewhere. Whatever they were talking about was well above his pay grade. He did not want to think about it. Or he might want to get involved, which seemed like the worst thing he could possibly do.

He walked around, lowering chairs and wiping table tops. Looking for ratspider nests. They always moved in overnight, and if they got a foothold they'd take it.

Why had they both decided to crash at his tavern? He was on the far edge of town for a reason. He didn't want to get involved. He just wanted to be able to go his way.

He'd had his own taste of politics years ago. He'd paid the price, and now he wanted to be left alone. He wasn't the angry young man, so proud of his heritage, that he had been. He hid what he was, now. It was safer for your health.

The Fury might walk around parading what she was, but sooner or later she'd learn to pass herself off as human. If she didn't, the whole world would come crashing down on her head.

Maybe that's why she'd bought the farm. Trying to start a new life, again. It wouldn't work so long as people knew she wasn't human. To some, there were eternal, gods and celestials and mortals. To the people here, there were humans and the beastkind. Nothing else. It was us and them.

Alfar managed to get away with it because she was so different. Because when people attacked, she had no problem murdering them. It didn't matter how experienced they were. They died, and she was totally unscathed and acting like she was a kid who'd just been on a fun trip or something.

It didn't take long for people to learn to treat the elf with a mild disrespect, rather than outright hate. Watching her wash the gristle of human flesh out of the hellhound was something that Mikhael wished he could forget. Especially with the way she chastised the dog for eating the fatty parts.

The Fury had better know what she was in for. To be willing to kill, and to intimidate. One didn't necessarily follow the other. It would take a certain sort of attitude. Indifference only worked well with Alfar because she so happy all the damn time.

"Keep thinking about me and I'll rip out your spine." The Fury snapped.

Mikhael turned, glancing at her, “You did kind of crash in here. Just wondering what kind of trouble you’ll bring.”

“No, you were wondering if I was willing to kill, or intimidate.” Astarte stated, revealing that she really could hear his thoughts and that it wasn’t a guess. “And when I suggested I would rip out your spine, I was being literal. I’m not human. I’m a Fury. Being violent is what we do.”

Mikhael spread his hands, “Not looking for a fight. Just stressed.”

She rolled her eyes, and went back to watching her patient, “You should be more stressed than you are, Mikhael. Someone attacked the two most obvious non-human entities on the same night. Alfar, and us. Or us by proxy.”

That had not occurred to him. If his heritage really was no longer a secret, like Alfar had suggested, then this might be the Guild. Moving in for the kill. They’d probably save him for last. He wouldn’t pose a challenge, unlike the others. The Guild preferred to surprise their targets. Mikhael’s death might have tipped them off.

It wouldn’t anymore. He might be dead by sundown, if the theory was correct.

Akheron

The window was broken as he approached the teashop. The door was also missing. However, rather than seeing her happy demeanour broken, Alfar was dancing. She was spinning and hopping around as she moved around the room, cleaning.

He stopped in the doorway.

The elf was incredibly light on her feet. It was almost as if she was choosing to drop from the air on each spin. Allowing her toes to touch solid ground. Her golden hair streamed behind her, and her laughter rang like music, the unheard music she was dancing to.

She seemed so delicate, like a dancer moulded from porcelain. Like she was an artist's idea of what an elf should like, rather than a living and breathing creature. There were no scars, no sign that she'd ever had so much as a pimple, let alone the plague that hit so many people. Her skin was flawless.

Her laughter rang like bells. He'd never stopped to listen before. To notice just how beautiful a sound it was. Alfar laughed so freely, always. The sound seemed to make the light brighter, colours more intense. Like she was ringing a sound inside his head, making his brain more aware of the world.

The elf paused, mid-spin, and turned. Her cheeks and ears flushed red, "You're not meant to just stand and watch!"

Akheron coughed nervously, and swallowed, "Sorry. I was surprised."

"No you weren't." Alfar stuck out her tongue at him, and looked at her feet in embarrassment, "I'm fine, Akr. The assassin is bleeding out at Mike's. Assie is already over there. You don't need to worry about me."

He winced, looking around, spying a mage sleeping against the hellhound with surprise. "And she is?"

"Ali." Alfar smiled, "I like her. Be nice. She did attack me. She didn't have a choice. He threatened her. The Guild threatened her. But you can't worry about them. He's here, Akr. He's here for you."

The Fury turned, glancing at the empty courtyard and back, "Who's here for me, Alfar?"

She rolled her eyes and skipped up to him, "You are the sweetest idiot, sometimes. Did you know that?"

His heart skipped a beat as he looked down at her, and the elf flushed again. "Sorry. I wasn't here. Forget it."

Akheron shrugged, and Alfar glared at him intensely, with eyes he was just realising weren't just blue. They reminded him of the rough seas between here and the East Continent. Dark and commanding. "I told you, to forget it. I mean it."

He laughed softly, "You're cute. Now. Who is coming here? Today?"

"Him." Alfar said, getting upset. "You can't say the name. He hear's it. Always. Doesn't matter how far you go. He hears it and he comes for you. I don't want it to happen, Akheron."

She burst into tears, dropping her head forward onto his chest. Akheron held up his hands in surprise, but the elf reached up and gently guided him to hold her, before tucking her fists against her face as she cried.

It may have been the most pathetic hug in the history of the mortal plane. He was too afraid to touch her, really. He didn't understand how the elf got inside his head, but she was. What she felt mattered to him.

The only person he'd cared about since hearing his muk'to had died was his sister. She was easy. He could feel her emotions in his head. He had no idea how to be there for someone he couldn't feel. He even had an inkling that being inside Alfar's head wouldn't help, that it would drive him insane.

She stopped crying slowly, and looked up at him. He looked down into her terrified eyes, and Alfar swallowed, "The Sins are coming for you. Not for Astarte. Not for me. The Guild was just a tool. They hurt me, and they hurt Mabeline, to hurt you. Only you, Akr. The Sins wants you."

He winced. He didn't like the sound, nor the name. He hated that mortals still associated Furies with hell and the demonspawn that had inhabited it. The Sins could be a cult of some kind, trying to venerate the time the Furies had been the chosen tool of Hero.

"Who are the Sins, Alfar?"

She bit her lip with a hooked tooth, and shook her head, burying it in his chest again. He heard her making choking sounds, and it actually hurt. It almost felt like a physical pain, listening to her cry.

He reached up hesitantly and patted her head.

Alfar shoved him backwards and glared, "I'm not a kid. Don't treat me like one."

Akheron winced, "Not my intention. Sorry."

The elf spun around, "Go see your sister. Warn her. She'll understand. She's not as stupid as you are. Cupid. Leave me alone."

He stared after her, not understanding any of what had just happened. He'd tried to make her feel better. She had to know that, and instead she told him to get lost. It didn't make any sense.

He barely knew her, and he'd come all this way to check if she was alright. Only to find he was the reason someone had attacked him. Someone she didn't think she could tell him about, not more than a hint, anyhow.

Akheron wasn't accustomed to being rejected like this. It hurt, more than he was willing to admit. He didn't want to walk away with her angry at him. He wanted to find something to do, to make up for how he'd insulted her.

He smiled slowly, stepping over the pile of the ash into the shop. For most people, what he was about to do was impossible. But most people didn't understand the true nature of an explosion. The way it tore particles apart, forcing them to recombine. Forcing them to release the energy they held.

Reversing it wasn't a simple matter, but it was no more difficult than the original explosion.

He raised a claw, his eyes glowing softly. The dust in front of him swirled into the air, and he focused, piecing it together. He stole energy from the dawning sun, sapping the energy out of each particle of light as he reconstructed the individual fragments of wood. Fragments became splinters. Flakes of paint began to resurface.

Akheron felt a bead of sweat run down the back of his neck as the door began to fit back into the doorway, and the latches rescrewed onto the edge. Fitting the door handle again was difficult,

he wasn't quite sure about the internals of the lock. A best guess was all he could offer. He'd probably need to change her key to fit it.

The Fury sighed heavily, and turned with a smile. The elf practically ignored him, just dusting her glass jars of herbs. She jerked a finger at the window, and kept moving. He smiled as he watched her step. Her toes moving deftly passed the tiny fragments of broken glass, threatening to break out in dance again.

Akheron cracked his neck and focused. Glass was an easy thing to restore. Gather the fragments, melt them, and reassemble. The specks on the ground all tumbled together, floating into a ball into the air in front of him. They moved passed the elf without touching her, gathering solidly into the crystal mess.

The glass wavered as it almost instantly became a formless blob, and Akheron moved it over to the window frame, and slowly stretched it out. Stretching it first to the corners and then to each run. He flattened it repeatedly, stroking and shifting it until it was flat.

He released the glass and turned and bowed to her. "I'll be going, then."

"Jerk."

Akheron stared at her in surprise, almost exploding himself, "Jerk? After what I just did? Come off it, Alfar. I'm trying. Really trying."

"You're a jerk for leaving." She said, tiptoeing over to him, "Before I can thank you. I'm sorry. I get upset. I don't just have your memories. I remember what you will have done, and not all of it is nice. Most of it isn't. I know you're trying. I forget. I'm sorry."

He smiled at her, "I'll try and remember for the both of us."

Alfar glanced down, the tips of her pointed ears turning crimson, "Why do you always have to say it like that?"

He didn't get it. No idea at all what he'd said to make her embarrassed. He thought he'd just said something to be kind, it didn't need that kind of a reaction from her.

Alfar stood up on her tippy toes again and kissed his cheek quickly, before scampering off into the kitchen before he could realise what had happened. He could almost swear she'd ripped through a portal to get away from him that quickly.

He touched his cheek in surprise.

There was no arguing with it anymore, no matter how much he wanted to. He actually liked the elf. He might not know her that well, but he knew her well enough to know that he wanted to know the rest. He wanted to know everything about her, and to spoil her.

He wanted to take her to the highest mountain, and show her the sunset over the continent. He wanted to have her laugh as he tried to feed her something half-terrible that he'd made himself. He wanted to make her smile for the rest of her life. He never wanted to see her cry again.

She called from her kitchen, out of sight, "Go to Mike's already, you sappy idiot! Assie is waiting there. Don't forget. She's coming. It's scary."

He heard her voice tremble, and was tempted to run to the kitchen. Except that right now, that would probably annoy her, not make her feel any better.

"Okay. I'll be back, soon."

Alfar

The feelings were even more intense than she remembered. They always took her by surprise. She didn't want to feel this way. She knew how it ended. The way he hurt her.

She didn't want to have to kill him, not again. Not every time. Didn't want to stare down at his face, crying as he died in her arms. As the light flickered out of those terrifying eyes of his.

Alfar sat underneath the bench, her knees pulled up to her chin, crying. He'd hesitated before he left. Sometimes he did come in, and she kicked him out angrily. Why did she do that? She wanted him to stay, to hug her.

But he couldn't. He had to go and be with his sister. That was important. If he didn't, then things spiralled and everyone died. She didn't like it when that happened. It hurt. It made her cry until she just couldn't anymore.

Alfar sank her teeth into one of her knees, making her focus on the now. She couldn't afford to get caught up in her memories. Her emotions were bad enough as it was. She needed to remember Akheron as he was now. Needed to help Astarte.

The other Fury was well studied. She'd recognise the reference to the Sins, and she'd try and prepare, but it wouldn't be enough. They needed help. Real help, not just what she and Garmr could offer.

She'd put it off long enough. She had to pay a visit to the other jerkface in her life. The one who controlled her ability to eat, rather than her heart. And this one knew he had it.

Alfar moved to the doorway, shuffling on her bottom, still holding her legs, "I'm going out. Mind the shop. Today is mint tea day."

The mage leaned up from where she'd been pretending to sleep, "He's cute. You should do something about that... Before all of this explodes."

"Akr can go to hell." Alfar stuck out her tongue, "He's always mean. I don't want him."

Ali laughed at her, "Sure. Right."

Alfar rolled her eyes and then she was in the palace. She stood up slowly, trying to appear confident and tall. She felt like a child in their parent's clothing. She walked up towards the meeting hall doors, ready to throw them open, when the guards there crossed their spears.

They didn't say anything, they just did it. She hissed at them, her ears pulling back, and she smelt their sweat inside the armour. Yet, they held their ground. Loyal.

Alfar stepped through the doors onto the other side, leaving them shut, and the guards wondering where the heck she'd just gone. More guards were in front of her. More spears clashed together, but this time a voice boomed out angrily, "Intruder!"

She saw the Vizier speaking in hushed whispers to an adviser at the end of the hall. A man in a black robe, his head hidden away. A representative of the Hunter's Guild that had just tried to take her head. After she'd been so nice to them.

Alfar reappeared at the end of the hall, passed all the guards. "I need your attention."

The two froze, mid-conversation. The robed figure turned slowly, "Guards, remove this filth."

She heard the racist implication. He didn't consider her worth his time, because she was an elf. That was fine. She didn't need him for this.

Alfar grabbed his robe and smiled sweetly. The man went to backhand her, and then paused, and looked around himself. She could smell the sickly scent of his fear.

She waved happily, and reappeared in the hall. "Like I said, I need your attention."

The Vizier sighed heavily, "What have you done with the Hunter, elf?"

"He's up there." She said, pointing directly above her, "It's okay. He can get down by himself. I need your attention."

The Vizier shrugged, "Fine. You have it. You've irritated me."

"One of the Sins is arriving at the gate. Now." Alfar said, glaring at him, "If you let her in, everyone dies. If you try and stop her, everyone dies. If you surrender to her, everyone dies."

The Vizier winced, "I understand that you think you're a prophet of some kind -"

"I am the Second Sibyl, of the Oracle of Mishia." Alfar snapped, glaring at him, "I have fought gods, and killed champions. I have walked this earth longer than you have been alive, and I have seen every timeline, every eventuality. Gods listen when I speak, puny mortal."

The Vizier didn't say anything. He just looked at her like she was another irritant. Which only served to piss her off further.

"I remember you as a child, Tane. I remember when your father tossed the bear out the window. When you cried in the wardrobe, hiding from everyone. I remember how you whispered to yourself, then. Promising yourself vengeance. I remember how happy you were the day you killed him. That even as an adult, serving the Hunter's Guild, it wasn't the contract fulfilled that made you smile. It was the memory of that moment, when your father took Mr. Fluffles away."

The Vizier coughed, his face turning red. "I never told anyone the name of that bear. You have done your research well."

"Eiden!" She tossed up her hands in exasperation, "I see everything. Everything! Every godsdamned timeline! I am not some charlatan, you freaking idiot. You have a Sin on your doorstep! A Sin!"

The Vizier shrugged, "I'm afraid that doesn't mean much to me. You say it like it has weight. Surely you foresaw that I didn't understand."

"The Hunter does." She snapped, pointing a finger at a nearby shadow. The man she'd transported to the rooftop emerged slowly, "You saw me re-enter this room. Impressive."

Alfar glared at him, "A godsdamned Sin is on her way here, meaning to raze the fucking city. Can you not grandstand for once in your life, Izak?"

The Hunter jerked in astonishment. "You know my name. That is singularly impressive. Beyond that. I do believe she is actually a prophet, your eminence."

The Vizier sighed, "So. Hunter. How afraid should we be of this Sin? Do you even know what it is?"

"To know it, is to know fear." The Hunter replied quietly, "You cannot speak their names. To do so, is to invite your own destruction. There are seven of them. They were trained by Huan Guo, at a time when it appeared they would become the superior empire of the Eastern Continent. They were then scattered across that continent, and imprisoned. They were mages, but too powerful to be trusted. They were placed into an eternal slumber. I have seen one myself, these are not rumours. If their power is a hundredth of what the tales tell, then none should ever be awakened."

“They all are.” Alfar snapped. “Already. They woke up a hundred years ago. The moment that Pheter died, they woke up.”

The Hunter shrugged, “That is... Possible. I did view the Sin before that point in time. Yet the traps were extensive.”

Alfar rolled her eyes, “Do you think a trap could hold me? After you saw how I moved you?”

“No.” The Hunter replied firmly, “I suppose not. Your grasp of time is beyond my own. You don’t need to move anywhere. You simply rearrange the ’verse so that you were already there. Is one of these Sins capable of such an act?”

“All of them.” Alfar shrugged, “But especially her. Close the gate. We’re out of time.”

The Hunter nodded to the Vizier, “For now, I suggest we play along with the little elf. We have no reason to doubt what she says, yet, your eminence.”

The Vizier sighed, and waved a hand, “Guards. Close the gate. Reinforce it.”

Alfar breathed a small sigh of relief. A small one. It was just enough to make the Sin hesitate, to wonder if someone had realised he was coming. However, it tipped her hand. Made him wonder if she might exist. He would be looking for someone like her.

“If she realises I exist, everyone dies.” Alfar said softly, breathing raggedly, “If the Hunter you sent to kill me dies, so does everyone else. If Akheron or Astarte die, then we all die.”

The Hunter nodded slowly, “How can we prevent this, for the immediate future?”

“You can’t.” Alfar smiled tightly, “The other’s are gathered at Mike’s Tavern. They are on their own, for now. The city has to prepare for the war. Whilst the goblins have been too afraid to attack with Akheron nearby, they will attack now. Because the Sin will ask them.”

The Vizier nodded grimly, “So we prepare. Sound the alarm, Hunter.”

“No alarms.” Alfar snapped, “She can’t know I exist. Quietly. I am scared, Vizier. Very. I can run away, but I don’t want to. Because you die. Everyone dies. I don’t want anyone to die. I’m doing what I can. Please.”

The Hunter nodded, “I’ll take care of it, your eminence. We will be prepared when they attack.”

The Vizier shrugged, “So be it. What about your hellhound, elf? Is he not a dead giveaway to your presence?”

“Hellhounds can’t be traced by magic.” Alfar shrugged, “Garmr’s sulking in the shop. He wanted to try and eat her. He’ll behave.”

The Hunter turned, “How did you survive the attack, by the way? You don’t even appear to be harmed. I helped coordinate that attack.”

“You can’t poison me.” Alfar grinned, “It doesn’t work that way. The mage was a friend. I’m upset you made her attack. If you hurt her again, I’ll rip your heart from your chest and feed it to my dog.”

The man in the hood simply nodded, “Well. That puts a new spin on things. I mustn’t underestimate you again, elf.”

“If you do, my boyfriend kills you.” Alfar grinned, and then went to skip away. Almost stumbling as she realised she’d slipped again.

Malis

She was awake, and could hear the voices in the main area of the tavern. She should be getting up and ready to serve. Charging in to help.

Instead she was just trying to breathe without feeling like she'd been run over by a horse and cart at full gallop. Every single breath sent a lightning bolt through her, and her heart burned. Making her eyes water.

Daitis had so conveniently left out how much making a contract with a celestial was going to hurt. She'd torn every muscle in her body. All of them, top to bottom. There was nowhere that was not tingling with agony.

It felt strange, being linked. She could still hear the whispers, and there were even more of them now, but she only heard them when she tried to. She could silence them with a wish.

The contract was a link. She could feel Kao. Feel what she wanted, and what her emotions were. She got the feeling that if she tried, she could talk directly to the god like they were standing in front of her.

So far though, it looked like she would be allowed to ignore this curse. Once her muscles stopped screaming, she'd be able to push it to the back of her thoughts and never let it out.

That thought didn't please Kao. She could feel the emotions sour. It wasn't anger. That she expected. She expected Kao to be like the masters. To want to hurt her, without spoiling her skin. Instead, it was just a heavy weight of disappointment.

That was somehow worse than being tortured. Knowing that she could do whatever she wanted, but she had to carry around a ball of sadness. A slow and debilitating feeling of shame that she couldn't shake. Always there. Promising to never fade.

The pain she was in wasn't too bad. It hurt, badly, but she had known worse. She was delaying getting up, but it was a luxury. She wasn't about to tell Mikhael what had happened. She didn't want to take that risk. He didn't have to know she had real magic now.

Couldn't know.

The emotions in her head turned playful, and Malis got the distinct impression that Kao was asking her to kiss him. She didn't know how she knew it, but she did.

Her face turned red, and she squeezed her eyes shut. That was asking too much. He was her master, and she was his slave. There were things that she could never do, even if he could do them whenever he wanted.

She wasn't going to risk everything, just to satisfy her own desires. What she wanted didn't matter. It never had.

As for trying to convince Mikhael to kiss her... She'd been trying to do that since he bought her in the marketplace. The things that made the regulars ask after her didn't work on him. Being meek didn't work either.

It was like he was afraid to touch her. Afraid that he might be taking advantage of the fact that she was his property. It was strange to have a master who even though he could take advantage of her. She belonged to him. He could do whatever he felt like.

She'd heard that Zafir had some laws around the treatment of slaves. That their potential couldn't be squandered through mistreatment or something like that. That damaging a slave more

than temporarily was considered a crime.

That made some sense to her. Treating your horse that way would result in similar punishments, here. All the same, it wasn't the culture of Falenthia. A slave was no different than a glass stein.

If you shattered it, it was perhaps annoying, or a disappointment. It was also only a half copper to replace it. She'd only been worth three copper coins. Mikhael had argued them down from five. She wasn't worth it to him, not with her heritage.

She didn't think he could abuse her, if he tried. He didn't. He was kind. Which made Kao's desire impossible. He was so kind to her he didn't realise that she had genuine affection for him. That she dreamed about a relationship with him that was inappropriate and impossible.

She didn't sleep in one of his shirts to be comfortable. It was freezing at this time of year, and wearing underwear would make much more sense. She didn't, because it left her alone with his smell. It was comforting.

Malis rolled her eyes. It felt like Kao was laughing at her. Bent over doubled and laughing so hard that she was crying. Malis was embarrassed. She'd been extremely embarrassed that Daitis had seen her like that.

There was a man that was disturbingly pretty. A man that made her question everything she thought she knew about what she was attracted to. She'd been surprised when she found she could be attracted. The training house hadn't been clear on that. On accepting a master's desires, yes, on having them yourself, no.

He was just like the other one. The new adventurer. He and his sister walked into a roomful of competitors, and not a single one had even tried to threaten them. Malis suspected that they'd been too shocked.

The girl, showing off her flat toned stomach, not feeling the need to wear actual armour. There was the possibility she didn't need it. She flaunted the fact that she wasn't human, showing off scales running over her hips. Used them to make the men watching her ask how far down the scales went.

She wasn't sure if the boy had scales. He was dressed more modestly, albeit just as senselessly. A loose-fitting shirt, and simple pants. That wasn't the gear of a great warrior, yet, Malis knew his name.

Akheron the Trauma.

He'd stood up the Hunter's Guild, and not just survived, but won. They'd sent hunters after him, to exact a blood price, and he'd destroyed them. Every last one. There were stories that he, his sister, and a paladin, were all that stood and fought against an army of insurrectionists. That those three had been enough to stop two thousand angry people.

He was too cute for his nickname. He seemed like nothing more than another of her nervous customers. Smiling sheepishly and wanting to impress.

The best of the veterans weren't like that. Like Mabeline, the Calamity. She usually just drank quietly in a dark corner of a room, until she saw a job she liked. Then she would claim it, even if someone else was already holding it. Nobody would argue, it wasn't worth it.

Malis had tried her training on Mabeline. The woman had smiled, kissed her forehead, and positioned a dagger between her legs and kindly told her to never try it again or she'd gut her all the way to her throat.

That was what she'd expected Akheron to be like. A brooding shadow that was too dangerous to touch. Yet, he didn't seem that way. He didn't seem to fit in with the adventurers crowd.

She blushed as she realised why she was thinking about him so much. She felt something purring quietly in her chest. Something that made her want Akheron to pat her on the head, or to sit in her section so she could tease him until he was sweating.

"No point." A voice came from outside the kitchen, "The Hunter's Guild will have me dead by the end of the day for failing. They don't take it well. Especially not the elf. She's pissed off someone very high up the food chain."

Malis flinched and tried to get up. She rolled onto her side, eyes watering as the pain burned through her. She already felt exhausted, like she'd been running around for a full day.

"Sorry to intrude. And eh... Sorry that I have someone else who is bleeding? Do you have any honeywort? Or something like that?" A new voice spoke. It was a woman, but she didn't recognise it.

Malis shoved herself upright to her feet. They had visitors.

She dropped the shirt from her shoulders, and turned slightly. She waited for the moment as Mikhael entered the kitchen in search of the herb to be bending over and reaching for her dress.

He flushed, turning away from her.

Malis hid a smile. She couldn't let him know just how much she enjoyed that. The way he squirmed when he saw what he thought wasn't inappropriate. She just needed to make him understand that this was his.

There was no need to be embarrassed of something you owned. If he liked what he saw, then he could look at it any time he pleased. If he wanted more, and she knew he was tempted, then all it would take was asking, or stepping forward and taking it.

Mikhael paused as he held a jar of crushed flower in his hand, and he whispered back at her, "Get dressed, Malis. Mabeline's been hurt, badly. I have a terrible feeling about today... Don't come out until I ask. Take your time. I don't know if I want you involved in this one."

Then he turned and left, not even giving her a second glance. She understood his worry, but it still felt frustrating. She knew people liked to look at her, but she couldn't even distract him.

She pulled the dress over her head, pouting. She found it so easy to make the people she didn't care about want more than they were able to get. She found it incredibly difficult to get one man to look at her as more than a table or sink.

She knew she was his property, but she'd really expected him to use her for something more than serving tables. It was a given. The training house had extensively explained how she was to behave if he tried anything.

They'd explained positions, actions and sounds. Explained the importance of preserving the hymen for the master. So many accidents could break it in mundane ways. They were to be avoided, so that the master was not angry and could claim first rights without doubt.

Yet, Mikhael didn't dare to look at her that way.

What was the point of all of that if he was never going to touch her? To electrify her the way she felt when he brushed her cheek. She didn't just want him. She craved him.

And now she could feel Kao in her head, waiting.

They had a contract. She had a contract with the goddess of chaos herself. A woman who would be able to get his attention. All Malis had to do was ask. She just had to open that doorway a crack.

She picked up her comb and began trying to get the knots out of her hair from her sweaty night of twisting and turning as her muscles tore themselves to ribbons.

She was tempted by Kao. She really was, but it would mean using magic. Of admitting that she wasn't just a human. She didn't want to be anything else. Didn't want to think about the horrors her mother had endured to create a child like her.

Charity

She hated the town she'd built.

The people of Order were stuffy and boring. They were already busy issuing edicts, and specifying who could walk where and when on their walkways. It wouldn't be long until they tried to order the weather. Even with the mages in their number, that was a folly.

The people of Mania were terrifying. They reacted impulsively, without clear aims. They all had big ideas, most of them impossible, all of them implausible. They just did things, and made everyone else suffer when they went wrong.

She needed a way to unite the two personalities. Together, there was at least some hope of surviving. Of creating a city worth living in, a city that wouldn't die the moment Charity moved on.

She'd hoped that Davos would be there, to unite them. He was reasonable. He could be cheeky at times, but he always seemed to know what to do, and when to do it, and how to do it in a safe way.

She never knew any of that. Her magic was ridiculously dangerous. Everything went wrong when she used it. Most of the time. She was always surprised when it worked. She didn't have much choice about using it, though.

She couldn't bottle it up, or she'd explode. She'd learned that as a child. There was a reason most djinn were enslaved, willingly. It contained their power, so that they didn't hurt the people they cared about.

Also, any time anyone was stupid enough to use the word, 'wish', her power flooded out of her like a torrent, perverting the desire and creating something worse than they could have imagined.

"Screwed up, huh?"

She spun, staring beside her in surprise, and then groaned, "Fuck. You're still alive? Gods. I was really hoping someone had killed you."

Alfar glared at her, "That's mean. You're mean. I don't remember doing anything to you."

"Irritating as shit, always stealing my bloody magic." Charity replied, "And, oh yeah, telling my boyfriends about how I'll break up with them, making it happen."

Alfar looked down, "Sorry. I don't mean it."

"Yes, we all know." Charity rolled her eyes, "You're the cute one. Why are you here, immortal kitten?"

"Don't like cats." Alfar pouted, "Like dogs. Like Garmr. I'm here because I remember being here."

"That's not a dog." Charity shivered at the memory, "I was also hoping someone had dismantled him. Not like we need a war on our hands. Look, I was summoned here, by you. Care to tell me why? And none of that destiny bullshit."

"Mean." Alfar glared at her, and then shrugged, "I haven't summoned you. Not yet. Soon. When I met the Gluttony. I made a mistake, got it wrong. Good thing I did. Gives you time to prepare."

Charity smiled slowly, "The magic screwing up the weather. It's the Gluttony. And he's still on the way. I can work with that. Say, you wouldn't mind pulling Davos back, would you?"

“Nope.” Alfar replied, “That’s a bad idea. Doesn’t go well, yesterday. Also, he’s mad at you.”

“I know!” Charity snapped, “I have to make it up to him. I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

“I remember.” Alfar shrugged, “But he’s still mad. You don’t make it up to him. Not for a while. You shouldn’t bring him back. He kills people. Mad, mad.”

“Oh.” Charity winced, “Insane. He’s slipped into insanity, because of... Well, where he is.”

Alfar nodded sadly, and touched her cheek kindly, “I’m sorry. I know you want a friend. Need one. Hard to be djinn. It’s okay. There’s a Fae nearby. You just need to say her name, and she’ll be here. She likes you.”

Charity’s eyes widened, “You have got to be kidding. I can’t summon the Lust. That would go badly. We’re on opposite sides. We were appointed to be on opposite sides. And I don’t even know why we’re opposing each other, this time around.”

“Akr.” Alfar pouted angrily, “He’s the heir. My boyfriend is the bloody heir.”

“Boyfriend?” Charity asked in surprise and Alfar winced, “Damn. No. Not boyfriend. Not yet. Not even next. Next, next. Sorry. Hard to remember.”

Charity smiled slowly, “You got a boyfriend. That’d be your first, right?”

“She’s my first.” Alfar swallowed, “She’s cute, but not yet. I mean, she’s totally cute now, but I haven’t... Said anything. Not yet.”

Charity blinked in surprise, “Huh. I thought you were straight. Your first is a girlfriend? Like you needed to be even more cute.”

“I hurt her.” Alfar whispered, tears springing into her eyes, “I hurt her really bad. Make mistakes. How can I even ask her? Why did I?”

Charity winced, “Guess you know the end as much as you did with my boys. That must make things hard. I’m sorry. But... There’s a reason you even want to ask. Maybe the time you have is worth it.”

“I ruin her life.” Alfar said, wiping the tears from her cheeks, “But I love her. Always.”

Charity sat down, roping one of the silks around her like a scarf, and looked up, “Why don’t you tell me about her?”

“Nope.” Alfar replied and sat down, “I don’t like you. Also, I’ll forget we’re not dating. It is hard enough as it is. I can tell you about your boyfriend, if you’d like.”

Charity frowned, “I don’t have a boyfriend. Haven’t for a while. A while longer, consider I was trapped for... A hundred and fifty years? Bit longer.”

“Lust!” Alfar said, rolling her eyes, “You like him. He likes you. You date.”

“Awkward.” Charity laughed, “We’re on opposite sides in this war. Which isn’t a war yet. I’m sure Hope will try and make sure it won’t happen, but this is the Sins we’re talking about. Lead by Wrath and Pride. War is going to happen.”

“It does.” Alfar nodded sadly, “I hate war. Not Aurili. She’s nice. Lust isn’t very nice. Except to you. He adores you, and what you can do. He’s happy to sit and watch you, most days.”

Charity blushed, “Oh fuck. I dance for him?”

“Yep!” Alfar grinned, and pulled a biscuit out of her dress, biting a corner off. That was a bit strange, but expected of her. Charity remembered that the infinite elf loved biscuits. Never had

enough. Seemed that had changed.

She sighed heavily, “You really want me to summon him. Is it just so I have a boyfriend? Or are you being a manipulative bitch again?”

“Both?” Alfar said sweetly, trying to look as innocent as possible. An innocence that Charity had never trusted. The elf was the definition of dangerous. She wasn’t on anyone’s side, and nobody could kill her.

Charity had tried, a couple times. Alfar just smiled at her and told her it wouldn’t work. A wasted effort. She hated how cute the creature looked. The creature that had condemned thousands to death, time and time again. A creature that had fought in so many wars shouldn’t look so cute.

“I disappear. Soon.” Alfar said, answering her thoughts, “I get hurt. Badly. I don’t stay. Can’t stay. It hurts too much. Holding Akr, when he dies. Jerk that he is.”

Charity sighed heavily, “Is that the first time you’ve abandoned reality?”

“No.” Alfar shook her head, “I abandoned it until I met Alteo. Hated it. Hated you all walking circles. Every circle. Hard to remember when it’s circles.”

The djinn smiled, “Yeah, I can see that happening. Sorry. Mortals are rather stupid.”

“So are infernals like djinn.” Alfar glared at her, “Akheron. He’s going to be your king. Do you really need another Hero? He was mean. Dismantled Garmr. I don’t like him.”

“Never met Hero, personally.” Charity shrugged, “I ran away from the Halls when I was young. He even sent Alexis to drag me back. I sent her packing. I mean, she did imprison in me in a stone for five hundred years, bitch, but I escaped.”

“Hope let you out.” Alfar replied, “Before that was what she was.”

“Faith, actually.” Charity retorted, “Might have been Hope in a different timeline.”

“Sorry.” Alfar said, looking distressed.

Charity rolled her eyes, “It’s fine. You should get going. You have a girl to woo, and I have a Sin to summon.”

Temperance

The wyrm raised an eyebrow at the see-through adventurer in front of her. This was a new one. She was used to all sorts of attacks, but she'd never had one astral project their soul to attack her.

For good reason.

"What are you trying to do, dungeon crawler?" Temperance asked.

The adventurer spun around, "You can see me? Yes! Awesome! Oh shit. Shit. Shit. You're a wyrm. I'll just be going."

Temperance grabbed her wrist, "Oh stop it. I'm not scary. I'm one of the Nine, after all. If you're projecting by accident, I might be able to help."

"Sort of, accident." The woman winced, "I'm a hunter. My name is Mabeline, and someone tried to kill me, and well... This happened. I lost my grip."

Temperance waved at a seat, "Edge of death. Not that uncommon to slip away. But usually you wouldn't be so solid by now."

"I feel like someone healed me." The huntress said with frustration, sitting down, and looking at a world she could barely interact with, "I don't why I can't go back. But then again, I don't think I've ever been here, wherever here is."

"You're in the port of Rhara Bag. Falenthia, if I'm not wrong." Temperance smiled at her, "That far from where you... Almost died?"

"Shit." Mabeline's brown eyes widened, "A day and a half's journey. I'm at Adairoft. How can my soul be here?"

"You're right." Temperance shook her head, "That doesn't make sense. No mortal can project that far, not on their own. Your killer did something. Tried to separate soul and body, permanently. Do you know who did it?"

"An elf." Mabeline winced, touching her throat, "Golden hair, hanging down to her perfect stupid ankles. Green eyes. You know, typical elf beauty."

Temperance bared her fangs, "Her. I can't think of another elf with green eyes and golden hair who has the power to do that. Not over this kind of distance."

Mabeline looked at her in surprise, "Guessing I pissed off someone important then. Not that I'd met her before. I think... She was annoyed that a new adventurer I met, just a kid really, liked me. His name is Akheron, and he's a Fury, if that means anything."

"The Hellbound Twins." Temperance said slowly, "There's a few prophecies about those two. More than a few. Alfar was positively obsessed with Akheron."

"You know Alfar?" Mabeline grinned, "She's got a teashop in Adairoft. She's one of my friends."

Temperance smiled at her patiently, "I am not one of Alfar's friends. She's tried to kill me, and my friends, on more than one occasion. We're powerful enough to mess with her perception of time. She doesn't like it much."

Mabeline stared at her, "And I'm the ghost. What the fuck, lady? How are you alive? I mean, I know you're a wyrm, but this Alfar. The elf who sees everything."

Temperance laughed, "You're right. But there is a limit to her power. And well... Last time

she attacked us, it was an all-seeing elf against a djinn, a Fae, and a frostwyrn. Not exactly a fair fight. It was a draw.”

Mabeline shook her head, “No. No you’re downplaying. A blonde frostwyrn? You’re her. The thing that attacked Zanfir... A three hundred years ago?”

“Closer to two.” She nodded, “Temperance.”

Mabeline smiled at her, still shocked, “Temperance. The patient frostwyrn capable of destroying entire countries, by herself. Your friends sound powerful, too. They as legendary as you?”

“More.” Temperance shrugged, “But let’s forget that. The elf, who hurt you, is an enemy of mine. An ancient enemy. I’ve been waiting to find out why I woke up. Seems that this might be it. I was hoping that Faith or Hope might have sent a message, but this is too much of a coincidence. You, being in this bakery.”

Mabeline swallowed nervously, “You got psycho enemies, Temperance.”

“More than you know.” She gritted her fangs, “That elf is a Sin. There are seven of them. Incredibly powerful and dangerous warriors. Unstoppable. Last I heard, they’d been sent to sleep, awaiting the day that their king would be born.”

Mabeline winced, “King? Of freaks that you’re scared of?”

“Yes.” Temperance smiled, “He’s supposed to be the heir to the Halls of the Hells.”

“Hell was wrecked.” Mabeline shrugged, “There are no hells. Not since the Godless Night. All the gods died, for a while. Hells went with them.”

Temperance nodded, “I know. The baker here, she’s nice. Filled me in. And is staring at me like I’m a madwoman because I’m talking to a ghost she can’t see.”

Mabeline laughed, “Sorry.”

The wyrn shrugged, “Can’t be helped. Not like I can drag a soul into the physical world. Though, with some effort, we might be able to drag your body here. So long as its in the same dimension as us.”

Mabeline smiled, “I’d like that. I’m scared. Maybe I’m already dead. Or I’ll get stuck here. I’ve... Never become something like this. I’m a huntress, and I’m good at it. Killing monsters.”

“Monster is a term of opinion.” Temperance replied and stood up, “Come on, up to my room. I’ll need the space, and the way it handles magic. Plus, there’s a couple hunters outside who sound like they’re going to be annoying if I don’t leave and break some windows.”

Spears bounced harmlessly off her as they headed up the stairs towards her room. Ignoring the adventurers seemed to be working for now. Eventually, the Guild would have to send someone scary, and they’d be worth talking to.

“You sleep on treasure?”

Temperance rolled her eyes, “Why is everyone always so surprised by that? Of course I do. I’m a frostwyrn. It’s what we do. Hoard gemstones.”

Mabeline shrugged, “Sort of thought it was just a story. I mean, hard, sharp and pointy things? That ain’t going to be comfortable.”

“Very wrong.” She said, sitting down cross-legged, and letting out a sigh, “Immensely comfortable, for someone like me.”

The ghost nodded, and carefully picked her way across the uneven floor, “So... What now?”

Temperance sighed, and spread her hands. She focused slowly, her golden mane beginning to glow, her blue eyes dancing white flecks. “You’re body... Well, let me see. It’s in a tavern. Healing. Honeywart? Wow. The elf tried to bleed you. Cursed you not to clot.”

Mabeline shivered, “That doesn’t sound great.”

“The honeywart is working.” Temperance rolled her jaw, “Also, I’ve never seen healing like this. Healing magic. Skilled... A Fury. Skilled and powerful.”

“Astarte.” Mabeline whispered.

Temperance nodded, “Probably. Also... What the fuck? Kao has a presence there. In a tavern. Crap.”

She held her head, flinching as the light faded, “Kao kicked me out. Won’t let me near your body. Any reason the goddess of chaos would be interested in you?”

“I’m her champion.” Mabeline winced, “I can call calamity’s in her name. She likes that I’m a hunter. Brings the chaos.”

Temperance laughed, and then rubbed her temples, “Well, Kao’el would know your other half is here. So I guess she doesn’t want me to reunite your parts. At least, not yet. Any ideas?”

Mabeline shrugged, “I guess... I’m meant to hang around you?”

The wyrm sighed, “I guess so. Which also means I guess I’m not going after the elf, not yet.”

Astarte

She frowned as she watched her brother approaching. His footsteps were heavy, as if he had something on his mind. Usually she'd be able to tell from the ball of emotions in her head, but not this time.

Right now he felt like a confused mist of spikes that would stab her if she tried to unravel it. She could only guess how messed up he was feeling. Whatever had happened between him and Alfar, it had seriously screwed him up.

She also couldn't help notice that the city gates were closing. Which was unusual. As were the number of guards she could see beginning to line the walls. The difference was subtle, but it was still there. The city was slowly preparing for battle. She had no idea who with.

It might be them. The non-humans. They were the ones who had been targeted so far. Yet, it was odd that Mabeline was the one attacked. She was barely associated with them. If they wanted to hurt the twins, burning the farm down seemed like a more intelligent way of going about it.

"How's our huntress?"

Astarte shrugged, "I had some problems with the bleeding. Mikhael had some herbs. She should be fine, but she hasn't woken up yet. Which is concerning. I'm hoping she won't end up with brain damage. Kao helped with that, I think... But it might be a waste if she doesn't wake up soon."

Akheron nodded and sighed, "You got a dying assassin in there?"

"He mentioned attacking Alfar. How is she?" Astarte frowned, and her brother winced, "The assassin has to survive."

Astarte swore and moved inside. She glared at the scarred man, "Apparently I'm not allowed to let you die. You still awake?"

The man shrugged, pulling back his hood, "Death would be a welcome escape."

She viewed him over, slowly realising that the scars weren't just burns. They'd been ritualistically applied. They were too symmetrical. They were layer upon layer of sigils. "Theurgist."

The man smiled up at her, "Intelligent. That's what our file on you says. Yes. I'm a summoner. I make deals with spirits and demiurges. Too many. My soul is being split amongst them. Fought over. Being alive is awful. Being dead... I don't know. Not worse. Not better. But different. A possibility of it all ending."

"Yeah, but we need you." Astarte shrugged, "So I guess I'll just have to break all of your agreements. Unbind you. It isn't going to be pleasant."

The man protested as she put a talon to his shoulder. She could understand his fear. So far as she knew, she was the only non-celestial who knew how to unbind things. It wasn't her own invention.

She'd discovered plans amongst some dwergaz artefacts for a machine that could summon, bind, unbind and banish demons. She'd adapted it, until she had a spell she could use. Without the hells, she hadn't had much to test it on.

This little assassin was her first test subject.

He screamed, writhing on the ground. She was peeling apart layers of reality, finding the places where his soul fragments had been hidden away, pressed into channels between dimensional folds.

There was always something holding onto the fragment, guarding.

She was a Fury. Most of the lesser demons scattered at the scent of her attention. One or two demons held on, until their spells rebounded and disintegrated them.

Astarte winced, "Akheron, something might be tracking me. Get rid of it when it arrives."

Her brother smiled, holding up his hand. There was a flash of fire as an imp burst onto the scene. Akheron snapped his fingers, "Ex'pa!"

The imp burst like a bubble from the inside, it's guts boiling and expanding too quickly to be contained by the frail flesh. It popped audibly, instantly. Astarte put a hand over her nose, "Gross. That stinks."

The next dozen went the same way. Gross stinking explosions whilst her brother grinned like a madman, his eyes sparkling with joy as he yelled the Wyrrdin word. One of his first words.

Mikhael was not as pleased. "Gods damn it! Do you have to that in my tavern? Do you know how hard it is to clean up imp guts!?"

Akheron laughed, looking over at him, "You actually do?"

"You're not the first idiot to summon one here." Mikhael said with irritation, "Can't you... Not?"

"He has to live." Astarte replied, finishing the unbinding. The exhaustion hit her like a brick wall, and her knees collapsed. She fell, but held herself up with one hand, breathing through her nose.

She was exhausted, but she wasn't done. Now she'd released him, she had to heal him. She wasn't sure if she had the strength for it, even if she borrowed magic from Akheron. Being a channel for magic had consequences, even for creatures that are magical in nature.

She'd just broken dozens of soul bindings. Mortals usually relied on gods to that. It wasn't something that they could achieve by themselves. A life of service to a god was the cost.

Astarte sat up, ringing sweat out of her hair for a moment. She took the man's shoulders and burst into life again. Her anger poured out of her, fuelling the magic and red glow.

He began to shake as he stared at her, and she stared back into him. Stripping aside all facades and seeing directly into his soul. She could see his shame. The things he wanted to hide from himself.

Her hands burned as the cells beneath her began to regenerate, and to reshape. She peeled away the excess layers of skin. Burned it away. Took the scar tissue and discarded it. She hardened what she found beneath it. Revealing the shaman who had been burned so many times by serving so many spirits.

Astarte leaned back, and then vomited everywhere. She fell onto the floor, noticing tiredly that she could see flecks of silver scales in it. She hadn't even fully digested her breakfast.

Akheron put a hand on her shoulder, and she felt an infusion of his strength. "You can't pass out yet. Alfar's warning wasn't just him. She said you'd understand. There's someone coming here. That's why we've been under attack, their influence. A Sin. She wouldn't speak his name."

Astarte rolled onto her back, wincing as he stomach gurgled unhappily. "Sin? A person who is a sin. I'm not sure if I... Maybe. There's an Western legend. Maybe. Oh shit."

She sat up weakly, holding her stomach, "It's about you, isn't it, Akheron?"

“Alfar suggested it.” He shrugged, “I don’t know what it means.”

“It means you’re him.” Astarte sighed heavily, “There’s a prophecy, Akr. That seven Sins would rise up, from a forgotten world. That they would each seek out and attack the rightful heir to hell. That they will be defeated, and become his servants. When all seven are his, he’ll become the new king of demonkind.”

Akheron winced, “That... Sounds disturbing. Who are the Sins?”

“Name ’em, and you wake ’em.” She shrugged, “That’s the legend. People who wake them die. A bunch of mages, from another era. Before Trei. Heroes, each one of them. Powerful, but god champions were rare then. Yet, Hero wasn’t anyone’s champion and he messed everyone up. Each one is supposed to represent one of the sins. Each one is supposed to be from a different race. Together they are supposedly the greatest reserve of magical knowledge the old world had.”

Akheron sighed, “And one of them is here. Today.”

“Yep.” Astarte flopped backwards, her silken hair spilling out around her, looking almost brunette with all the light sucked out of it. “That’s why the city is going on lockdown.”

“If he’s here, for me, he’ll find us.” Akheron swallowed, “Maybe I’m supposed to talk to him.”

Astarte closed her eyes, “Too tired for this crap. I saved the shaman. The rest of you can work out how we deal with a terrifying mage right out of legend.”

She didn’t hear their responses. She really was too tired. A Fury wasn’t just magical. They subsisted on magic. Food was only sustenance so long as it could be converted to mana when they digested it. She’d just about burned herself out, saving the idiot.

It had better be worth it.

Mikhael

He wondered if burning down the tavern and rebuilding it might be an easier way to clean it. Imp guts, vomit, blood. Nobody was moving to help him, and he wasn't particularly looking forward to scrubbing it.

He had exactly zero interest in this fantasy about a powerful warrior out of legend coming to kill one of them. He didn't have much interest in the murderous mage that decided to heal for that matter. He just wanted them out.

Akheron looked from his sleeping sister, to the tavern owner. "Say, Mikhael. I met a mage at Alfar's, that tried to kill her. Apparently she liked her. Ali? Do you know the name?"

Mikhael glared at the man responsible for the mess and then shrugged, "Sure. First class. She's a warmage. Usually contracted out from the Vizier. She's a slave."

Akheron twitched at the last word, and glared at him, "A slave. The Vizier has slaves. That he just hands out on assassination contracts."

Mikhael shrugged, "What's so weird about that?"

"Ozandius doesn't have slavery." Akheron shook his head. "We got rid of it in Solas a hundred years ago."

Mikhael stared, "What the hell. Falenthia is built on slaves. Heck, one of my waitresses is a slave. She's in the kitchen."

The Fury stepped over to him, and Mikhael became uncomfortably aware that though the boy seemed small and skinny, the ends of his fingers were talons that did not look they were hesitate to slice through his gut.

"Bring her."

Mikhael considered the request and winced, turning, "Malis? Can you come here for a minute?"

The woman emerged, smiling, but confused. She was still brushing her hair. She looked around the room and winced, "You've got to be kidding me. I have to clean this up?"

Mikhael laughed, "Have I ever made you clean up blood?"

"No." Malis shrugged, "But you don't usually hurry me in the mornings. What's up?"

Akheron looked her up and down, "That bracelet, on your left wrist. That's enchanted. When you disobey, it shrinks, and lights your nerves on fire."

Malis hid her wrist behind her instinctively, and glared at him, "What business is that of yours?"

Mikhael sighed, "Akheron is from Ozandius, Malis. Apparently they don't have slaves."

Malis shook her head, "It isn't like that. Mikhael has never treated me as any different than any of the girls. He houses me, clothes me, feeds me. The training house was awful, yes. But it isn't like I had a lot of options. Starve to death, or be a servant for twenty years. I know why I prefer."

Akheron shook his head, "No. You're trying to make it seem better than it is. Justifying slavery because it made some things easier. The homeless have the temple of Sarin. Slavery is an excuse for half-measures. As is the bracelet."

Mikhael flinched and took a step backwards as he heard an audible crack, and the metal band

fell from her wrist onto the ground. He looked at Akheron, "So, you're going to free all the slaves? In the entire Empire?"

The Fury smiled at him, flashing his fangs, "Malis is free. But she's still your responsibility. I gave her back herself. You still have your side of the contract."

Mikhael shrugged, "So what have you changed?"

He heard her. Mikhael turned slowly in surprise, and saw the young waitress, her hair still sticking out in a matted mess, holding the two halves of the bracelet, and crying. She was smiling.

Akheron put a hand on his shoulder, "You're an idiot, Mikhael. You might have given her a decent life so far, but she was only ever one bad day away from screaming in pain. She was always up for sale to someone worse. Those possibilities were always with her. Her choice was never her own."

The woman smiled up at him, "Why do you understand? I didn't even... I didn't notice."

"You don't notice the weight when you're a slave." Akheron nodded, "Humans think my kind, Furies, are demons. That's because the king of the demons, Hero, enslaved us. For ten thousand years. My sister and I were the first of our kind born to freedom. The only ones of our kind. I share some of my muk'to's memories. Of what he made us do."

Mikhael looked at the Fury, a new appreciation appearing. The man hadn't just been incensed because of some cultural barrier. He understood an empire built on slavery better than the bartender. Just because the boy mostly looked human, he'd been treating him that way.

Akheron crouched in front of the girl, and touched the bracelet. It snapped back together, a silver chain appearing from the air and locking around it. He picked it up and put it around her neck, as she knelt there, too scared to move. He stood up, and helped her up. "Don't forget. Others still suffer."

Mikhael winced, "I really did hurt you, didn't I?"

Malis smiled at him, "If I didn't realise, how could you?"

He should have realised. He'd bought her life. He was responsible for all of her actions. He was supposed to know everything about her wellbeing. The things she didn't know. Slaves didn't have experience of everything.

Malis had been caught staring at customers the first time he'd seen two adventurers making out. She'd had exactly no sexual education. She didn't know that people who could feel for each other. Explaining casual relationships had been even harder.

Yet, Mikhael hadn't noticed the pressure that being a slave put on her. Would put on everyone. He'd never considered it.

There was something else he'd been trying to help her with, and totally failing at. If this Fury was willing to help her over this, then he might be able to help with the other.

"Akheron, I have a favour to ask." Mikhael said slowly, "Consider it... The cost of screwing up my day with imp guts."

The Fury turned him, "What do you want?"

"Malis is like me. A little." Mikhael said, "She has some... Non-human ancestry. I've been trying to help, but I'm at the limit of my experience. I don't want others to find out. They'll hurt her."

Malis' eyes went wide, "Just tell him! Right. That's nice of you."

Akheron smiled at her, "I already noticed, sorry. I'm not entirely a Fury, either. My muk'do was human. My people are... Even more xenophobic than the people in this city, by their nature. Humans are weak and die easily. Furies live for thousands of years and... One of the more common greetings is to stab someone in a lung or something. For friends. Because it doesn't really put us at risk of death."

Malis glared at him, "That makes you like me? Mikhael is part elf. You're part human. I don't think either of you remotely understands."

"I'm part goblin." The assassin said, from where he was leaning against the wall, having discarded his blood-stained cloak. He waved at his tattoos. "Goblins are decent shamen. I think I was six when I coaxed my first wind spirit out of a pile of garbage. My father beat me very close to death when he found out."

Mikhael watched as the waitress' eyes bugged out. She was part goblin as well. The result of a raid. That was the part of her he was struggling with. He'd found her whispering to a pile of dishes left too long in the sink. She'd managed to summon a tiny fist-sized dirt spirit. She hadn't even realised she was the cause, at the time.

Akheron shrugged, "It means I'm not human, Malis. Pretending I am would be an insult to myself. I can't bury what I am. It would be wrong. All it would do is hurt me. If I tried to hide my magic, for example, then eventually it would surface all on its own, and the people around me would die. Probably in an explosion that would rock the entire city."

The assassin agreed, "Yeah. Kids who reject their magic end up burning out. Usually killing everyone around them. We call them hexex in the Guild. Useless as mages. They locked out their ability. But they can still explode again."

Malis looked from one to the other, "I don't want my magic. I don't want to be different."

"That's the point." Akheron rolled his eyes, "You're not. They are. You don't belong to humanity, girl. You have more in common with the others. Do I seem human to you?"

Mikhael stepped forward, "Back off, Fury."

He glanced over his shoulder, looking at the waitress, her hand clenched around the bracelet hanging from her neck. She was glaring at it, tears falling slowly. She looked up slowly, "So I'm a mindless beast, am I?"

"That's not what goblins are." Mikhael said without thinking. He'd fought a few in his time. It was easier for greenies to think that goblins were mindless. When you fought swarms of the things.

They weren't. They lived underground, in massive tribes. Hierarchies of control. The leader was whichever shaman was preferred by the strongest of the local spirits. Whichever shaman would make the spirit stronger.

Malis turned and ran out of the room.

Akheron

He was angry with Mikhael. The man hadn't even noticed how badly screwed up the kid under his guidance was. That she didn't even understand who or what she was. She didn't know the first thing about herself.

He should be preparing, waiting for the stranger that had terrified Alfar, but he had something else to do. Right now, it was more important.

He brushed passed the bartender, heading into the kitchen. The man did try to stop him, but a slap from Akheron's tail put him on his ass instantly. He tucked it back around him as he entered.

He saw her immediately, out of the corner of his eye. Sitting on a dirty mat, hugging her knees and cuddling an old and stained shirt. Akheron didn't turn towards her, he didn't say anything.

He walked over to the cupboards, and began gathering a few things. He was sure it wouldn't compare to what Alfar had to offer, but he still knew how to make tea.

"No."

Akheron spun in surprise, looking at the elf glaring at him. Her ears pulled back against her head, and a tray in her hands. She put it on the bench, "Today is mint tea day."

He smiled, "Thanks, Alfar."

She jabbed a finger in his chest knocking him backwards, "Don't do it, Akheron. You hear me? I won't like it."

She was gone before he could ask exactly what he was about to do that would hurt her so badly. He shook his head. He was feeling irritated now. She got under his skin like he was a coat.

He picked up the tray, and walked over, putting it down in front of the young girl, before sitting cross-legged in front of her. "Alfar's nice. I just... Annoy her. She wouldn't have brought you tea if she didn't like you. Either that, or mine was going to be so bad it would send ripples through the timelines."

The girl smiled weakly, "Does that work for you? The self-deprecating humour?"

Akheron shrugged, "Wouldn't know. I've never been interested in anyone romantically."

Malis looked up at him in confusion, "What? But... It feels... Good."

"Never had the feeling." Akheron replied, "Well, not until recently. Alfar annoys me, but I think I like it. Is that what attraction feels like?"

Malis shrugged, "I wasn't taught what attraction was. If you're just working it out... Maybe."

Akheron waved at the tray, "Ladies first."

"I'm not a lady. I'm a slave." Malis whispered, clutching the bracelet. Akheron sighed heavily, "You're not, you know. You're free. Mikhael didn't even try and argue with that. I think if he wasn't such an idiot he would have freed you a long time ago."

The girl blushed, but did pick up a cup and saucer. Akheron smiled slowly, "Him? He's not bad looking, I guess. A bit stupid."

Malis went even redder, and then smiled at him, "Is that what Alfar sees in you?"

Akheron coughed, looking down, "Yeah. I wish things were that simple. Alfar isn't... Normal. Not even for an elf."

“She’s a prophet.” Malis shrugged, “Everyone knows.”

Akheron shook his head, “No. Prophets have visions every now and then that tell them of a possible future or two. Alfar... Is a fixed point in all of time and space. Everything that was, everything that could be. Every secret, every silent and private moment. Every horrific incident. She is a living witness. She sees it all, all of the time. She doesn’t get to narrow her view to just this moment, or just to what she was there to see first hand, because she was there, even when she wasn’t.”

Malis sipped her tea, not knowing what to say. Akheron smiled at the nervous girl, “Alfar is, obviously, an elf. But she has been alone amongst her people, always. I don’t think anyone will ever come along that can understand her fully. She has friends. Mostly gods. They can get close. But her magic, for her, is what I would see as an undying curse. I’m sure most elfin would picture it that way. She doesn’t, from what I can tell.”

Malis put the cup down slowly, glaring up at him, “You are so not subtle.”

“I’m a Fury.” He shrugged, “My expertise is in explosion magic. I’m not sure subtle even exists in my native tongue.”

Malis gave a small laugh at that one, and then sighed, “I signed my contract. I’m a shaman. I don’t want to be. You calling me a goblin just... Hurt.”

“They’d accept you, if you want to meet some of them.”

Malis started, “What?”

“Goblin raiding parties are awful, I’ll give you that.” Akheron nodded, “And if I went anywhere near a burrow, I expect we’d find it empty. But you smell like them, and for that, they’d welcome you in. Knowing the culture, they’d probably throw a feast. To welcome you as family. Because to them, family is more important to anything else. You not having one, being abandoned, would be a high crime amongst them.”

The girl winced, “Yeah. Not climbing into a hole by myself.”

“Wasn’t suggesting it.” Akheron grinned, “Especially not yet. One day. When you’re ready to learn about your people. They aren’t the mindless monsters humans make them out to be. I mean, humans call my kind demons... And what do they even know of demons? Tell me. What is a demon?”

Malis shrugged, “Some sort of magical creature. Hides in the shadows. Likes hurting things.”

Akheron grinned at her, “Half of the sixth circle of hell, before it collapsed, was devoted to the demonic shopping district. Pricier items included things like food from this world, sex toys, and clothing by famous tailors.”

The young girl looked at him, “They sound like people. Is that your point?”

“Sort of.” Akheron shrugged, “But people are also different. Being stabbed wouldn’t be much of a greeting between humans. It’d be a bit stupid. Being different isn’t a problem. It’s... Something to celebrate. To be proud of.”

Malis looked down at her feet, “Thank you, but I can’t accept that.”

“Because you were trained as a slave?”

She nodded slowly, and sighed, “It hurts you. That word. Doesn’t it? So why do you make a point of saying it?”

“Because it hurts me.”

Malis smiled slowly, “You like pain then?”

“Do you always deflect with humour? Does that work for you?”

She rolled her eyes, and Akheron picked a biscuit off the tray and held it out, “You need to start taking care of yourself. You’ve been watching this. I’m not going to tell you to take it. You’re free.”

Malis looked at it in his hand, considering. She very clearly didn’t want to take it from him, not without permission. He was trying to force her to snatch it, to realise she could do things for herself.

The girl chose another avenue.

He cracked up laughing as she ducked forward and bit a chunk out of it, causing the rest to fall apart and onto the tray. He dropped the crumb, leaning backwards, and then he groaned, “Oh hell. That was what she was talking about.”

Malis blinked, “Huh?”

“Alfar.” Akheron said, “I think... I just made her jealous. Maybe.”

Malis laughed, “So. Are you going to ask her out? It isn’t like you can surprise her.”

“I don’t know what I feel about her yet.” He replied, “I’d rather sit with that for a while. I don’t want to hurt her, which is one of the reasons I think I might like her. But asking her out if I’m not prepared for a relationship would also hurt her.”

Malis blinked, looking at him in surprise. “You’re free, and can have whatever you want. And you hesitate?”

“I will live for thousands of years.” Akheron replied, “So will she. Committing to a relationship that will last that long can afford a few days of thinking about it.”

Malis went to say something, but was interrupted as a voice cracked through the air. The girl cringed as the floor shook with the force of the word.

“Akheron!”

He stood up slowly, “Well, I guess our Sin is here.”

Alfar

She looked up as the door opened, “Sorry, we’re full right now.”

The man glanced around the teashop. Whilst it wasn’t empty, there were exactly two customers, and five tables to sit at. He waved a hand, “Reserved?”

“No.” Alfar smiled, “I just hate you, assassin.”

The Vizier’s Guild adviser, Izak, smiled, and pulled back his hood, revealing a series of tattoos. He smiled at her, “Elf, there is no reason for the hostility.”

Alfar snapped her fingers, and Garmr stood up slowly from in front of the fireplace. The hellhound let out a low growling sound, and Alfar’s customers suddenly found the floor extremely interesting.

Izak sighed, “You really don’t want to do that.”

“Oh, I know.” Alfar turned around, “You are infected with the Fel. You expect it to help. It will have, when Garmr didn’t attack you for walking in here. But I don’t like you. I don’t like what you do. And I don’t like being threatened.”

The assassin laughed, “Yes. But you said that your boyfriend would kill me. I can’t exactly let that one go. I will not underestimate you.”

“You already did.” Alfar sighed, walking away from the stove top, “You won’t bring help with you. It’s insulting. You think my dog is the threat. I like Garmr. He’s cute.”

She tossed a biscuit, “But, to state the obvious, assassin, I have seen everything you can think to do. It’s extremely boring. I don’t like boring.”

Alfar caught the dagger, spinning it on her finger, sighing sadly. It had been nice to see Akheron, even if he was a massive jerkface. Making the goblin fall for him. Something only an infuriating Fury would do. Infury.

The infurious goblin. She didn’t think she could explain how much that hurt to Akheron, nor did she want to. He was petulant. She really did not like that she couldn’t stop thinking about him. Not even with an ugly shaman of mass destruction staring at her.

“Garmr, sit.” She said, making a decision. “Jerkface. Sit.”

Izak sat at the table, looking around, “It is a cute little shop, if a little too small. Couldn’t you afford anything better?”

“I chose this one because I already would have chosen this one.” Alfar said as she moved along the jars. She already knew one she was going to pick. She still took her time choosing it. She enjoyed the catharsis.

She spun, catching the second dagger in her teeth. She glared at him before spitting it out. “I will tell you, that’s boring. Behave.”

She turned back, ignoring whatever drivel he had to say. It was never interesting. Not even when she kissed him just to see if it would shut him up. He’d just got louder then. She hated how loud he was.

Alfar blew a strand of hair upwards as she let the dagger move through her into the wall above the stove top. She poured the tea, and walked back, setting the tray in front of him. “Two silver.”

The man laughed up at her, “You’re charging me?”

“For the wall. And the tea.” She replied, “This time. Other times I killed you. They weren’t very fun. I like this time. Less annoying. A little.”

He frowned, “You’ve killed me?”

“You always die.” Alfar rolled her eyes, “Silly little goblin. You will even try and kill Aurili once. Lilibeth skinned you alive. You just don’t seem to get it. The Hunters Guild are impressive, but you are not. I ticked off Ausosa by existing. That’s something that sucks to relive. What are you? Who do you threaten by existing?”

“Everything?” He shrugged and sipped his tea.

She picked up his wallet, frowning as she only found four coppers. She dropped the empty leather by the dead body. Not dead. Soon. Shaking and foaming. He was less boring this way. She hated boring.

He wouldn’t attack Garmr now. Wouldn’t be stupid enough to attack her in front of Akheron either. Whilst she’d enjoyed the infury showing off, it was better this way. Best.

Alfar sat down at the table, and sipped at the bitter tea. The taste of almonds add an interesting flavour to it. She had to consider if she could do something with that. Oh. Almond milk. Popular. Soon, not yet. Too hard to get hold off, now. Even for her. She didn’t want to dance through time. It was hard. She’d have to wait until almonds were grown on farms. Two hundred years ago? No. Three hundred years until.

Ali approached cautiously, “Did you really just kill an adviser from the Hunters’ Guild? In broad daylight?”

Alfar blinked in surprise, “Did I? Oh. Him. He hurt my dog.”

“Garmr looks fine to me.” Ali said, waving a hand, and Alfar rolled her eyes, “Not yet. Next. When I don’t stop him. I didn’t like it. Garmr cried. His paw will hurt. It isn’t fair.”

The mage nodded nervously, and went back to trying to reassure the customers. Alfar smiled, and nodded to Garmr. He and the body vanished. He’d enjoyed it. She wouldn’t. It would always be icky giving him a bath after he ate someone. Especially something that would have a Fel infection yesterday.

Alfar pouted. People had avoided her shop today. Tomorrow even. That wasn’t fair. All she’d done was get rid of a dick bag. The biggest bag of dicks. Like the fingers he’d collected from his victims.

If she didn’t kill him, then he made things even worse. Made everyone terrified to enter her store. Put a black mark of the Guild on it. Just because he was a gigantic dickbag.

The Sin had seen the closed gate, and instead gone looking for Akheron. To smile and sweet talk him. It wouldn’t be hard, the infury had a thing for elfin. That hurt, more than it should have.

There was nothing between her and Akheron, not yet. She hadn’t given him anything. The Sin would give him whatever he wanted. That was the point of this one being the first to see him.

Envy. That was their title.

The envy could see everything that Akheron wanted, that he didn’t have. Unfortunately, amongst that mess would be an elfin girlfriend, and she’d offer herself up without a thought.

That was why the Sin would know who Alfar was. She would be cute and stupid and reveal who she was, to try and prevent the kiss. She’d fail.

That was what she was afraid of, for now. Afraid of Akheron. What he would become once the envy got her claws into him. Seduced him with things that weren't lies. Truths were scarier. Harder to argue against.

The envy would be twisting the words. It is easier to hide things in the light, than in the shadow. In the shadow, you reach out for things you can't see. The light is blinding.

Not every timeline lead to the tree. All the good ones did. Lead passed the tree and into the heartbreak that followed, too. The only way to save this world from what was going to happen, was for the tree to happen.

It was soon, not yet. There were things that had to happen first. Careful things. She would have to walk a line. She was just an elf, she wasn't a Fate. Yet, for now, she would have to play that role.

"You hijacking my job?"

Alfar rolled her eyes, "I don't want your job, Daitis. You're bad at it. Too new. You haven't learned to see yet."

The black-eyed man leaned back in the chair, and produced a gold coin, "What's your nicest tea?"

Alfar stood up, and ran a hand across the glass jars, "For a Fate? This one is for celestials... Aurili likes this one... No. None of those. This one."

A teapot appeared in her hands and she measured out a careful amount into it, before appearing in the kitchen. She poured the near-boiling water into it, before appearing back next to the table, with a tray.

She put it down gently, "Cocoa, coffee and milk. Known as the 'nectar of the gods' in the Dawning Lands. Talin invents it. Not yet. Not really tea. But you like it."

The Fate grinned at her, shaking his head, and he poked at the things sitting on the plate beside the pot. "And what are these?"

"Better not to know all the ingredients." Alfar smiled, "But they're yummy. Put them on top, they melt. Different colours taste the same. Just for pretty. Made from a pink flower. Alteo."

He smiled sadly at her, "You miss her, don't you?"

"Always, and never." Alfar replied, "She throws me a birthday party every year. I'm there. And here."

Daitis sighed heavily, and let the small round treats begin to melt on top of a cup he poured himself. "So, Alfar. You're going to play my role in all of this. Aren't you?"

"You're not allowed." Alfar pouted, sitting down again, "This is my fault, after all. It isn't a celestial thing. You have to watch."

"We can have champions." Daitis shrugged, "You really did screw things up, though. You knew the possible timelines, and instead you chose another. You saved Trei, true enough. Saved us all, in some ways. But you woke up the Sins. They're just people. The gods don't get to intervene, not until it will be too late, anyway."

"Gods don't get to intervene." Alfar replied, "The Sins just want their king. A thousand years early, because of me. Before Akheron is ready. He will be the king. There isn't a way to stop that. I will do what I have to. To guide him."

Daitis sighed, “You know it’ll hurt you. Are you sure you’re up to the task?”

“I fail sometimes.” Alfar replied sadly, “I won’t want to give him up.”

The Fate nodded, “That’s what concerns me. You see all the possible timelines... But you can imagine new ones. Every time you do that, reality warps. It’s dangerous, Alfar.”

“I knew Yio and Sarin and F’rir.” She snapped, glaring at him, “You’re an amateur. I don’t need you telling me what to do. I knew it would be. Knew it would cause the Sins, before any of you.”

“I don’t want to watch reality unravel.” He said, and sipped his sweet drink. “Wow. I can see why the Fae would like that. They do tend to have a sweet tooth.”

Alfar sighed, glaring at her feet, “I either succeed, or I fail, Daitis. There’s nothing anyone can do about that. Not even me. So drink your drink.”

The Fate sighed heavily, “I hope the world will still exist so I can get another.”

That wasn’t up to her. That was up to Akheron.

Malis

She sat quietly in a corner of the tavern. She wasn't sure if she was even welcome, but she had a feeling that Akheron would stop the conversation and go get her if she ran away. Which she absolutely wanted to do.

This person, this elf, was the reason the city was on lockdown.

They were a pretty elf. Blonde hair that hung down to her ankles in a golden wave. Malis got the distinct feeling that it couldn't knot, and was feeling more than a touch jealous of it.

Their eyes were a brilliant green, and showed an intelligence she found terrifying. There were only two people she could say showed that level of intelligence. Astarte, and the man who had invented methods of torturing everyone at the training house.

Astarte and Akheron sat next to each other, the elf sitting across from them. They were talking, quietly and peacefully, and yet Malis was certain the entire world was about to explode into flames.

"My name is Rsja." The elf said, bowing her head, "I know your names. Akheron, and Astarte. I know much of the stories of your lives, but I don't tend to put stock in stories. It is better to know someone."

Akheron sighed, "I've heard it's dangerous to say your name."

"Perhaps." The elf nodded, "Perhaps not. I can hear it. Always. So if I were to swear fealty to you, Akheron, then in the midst of any battle you could whisper my name, and I would arrive at your side. Ready to protect the one I serve."

Astarte frowned, "Fealty? Is that why you're here?"

"In a way." Rsja shrugged, "It is difficult to explain. Not without explaining what I am."

"A Sin." Akheron shrugged, "Though I can't say I know what that means."

"A great deal." Rsja grinned, the curved elfin fangs flashing for a moment. Malis stared in surprise. There were diamonds embedded into the two fangs that hung from the top of the woman's jaw.

The elf waved over at her, "Shaman. Come over here, a moment. If you would."

Malis felt her heart skip a beat, and she stood uncertainly. Kao exploded into violent anger in her head. Letting her know the goddess would be extremely pleased if she managed to kill the elf.

She walked over timidly, and Rsja looked her up and down, "What is your name, little one?"

"Malis." She replied nervously.

"What do you desire, Malis?" Rsja asked, a twinkle appearing in her eye, "Above everything. What is it that you want?"

The thought bubbled into being, and Rsja sighed, "You wish to be free of your ancestry. To no longer be part goblin. To be human."

Akheron glared, "Don't. Don't you dare."

Rsja shrugged, "As you wish. However, as I am the Envy, I could grant this wish of hers. I am not some djinn, swallowing your desire whilst cursing you by turning desire to nightmare. I am the Envy. Which means what you desire is what I can give."

Akheron smiled slowly, "If that's so, and you wanted my attention, why didn't you grant my desire?"

"You have none." Rsja said, disappointment in her voice.

Malis sat down at a chair nearby. After that, she wasn't sure she could stay standing. She also felt almost bitter towards Akheron. He might want her to embrace the blood in her veins, but she didn't want to. This woman might be her only chance to be free of it. Kao's ball of emotions became suffocating and disappointed.

Akheron raised an eyebrow, "None?"

"None that are clear." Rsja corrected herself, "I can grant the deepest desire. Yet, Akheron, you have only just become aware that you can even have desires. Certainly, you crave the magic that you explore, yet you have already mastered it. I cannot grant you that which does not exist yet. I must leave it to you to invent new ways to explode things."

He nodded, "I guess that makes sense. What about my sister?"

Rjsa laughed, "Merely self-preservation, Akheron. Your sister would use whatever I grant her to attempt to end my life. She does not like your presence in the prophecy."

Astarte interrupted, "So he really is the heir of hell?"

"Of course." Rsja grinned, "And, I will be the first to consider him for the crown. It was why the Sins were created. We were forged, by Dyys and Alexis. A failsafe, for if Hero was ever killed. We weren't created, as such. Your muk'to, and Alexis, took us from amongst the various peoples. They taught us how to be better, and then they rewrote our bodies, our minds, and our souls. Improving us. To be the honour guard of the new king."

"The Hall of Hells has been destroyed." Akheron stated flatly, "It won't be coming back."

"Incorrect." Rsja replied, "The work to restore it is well underway. The Pride is building the foundations. Nothing you can do will avert that. If you are not to be the king, we will find another candidate."

Astarte winced, "You're leaving something out."

"If Akheron fails the tests of the seven, he will fail by dying." Rsja said, smiling and flashing her diamonds again. "Let me be very clear - neither of you have a choice in the matter. I cannot be defeated, except by the king's candidate. And that is what it will take to both pass the test, and to stop me."

Malis felt terror gripping her heart. This elf, whoever she was, felt exactly no fear saying that. She had two of the most famous adventurers in front of her, an assassin of the Guild, and another shaman. Yet she wasn't concerned with any of them.

Akheron might be what the elf wanted, he might be able to defeat her. Yet, the woman was unafraid. Fear protected you. It made you stronger. To have no fear meant that this woman was unpredictable. Worse than a strong opponent. A weaker one that might do anything at all.

The elf turned to look at her with disdain, "Not so weak, shaman. Strong enough I can see into you without trying. I can see how long you've had your contract. You are not yet a threat. I cannot see with which spirit you have signed, but considering your first was a tiny speck of dirt, I wouldn't expect much of you. The Greed is our shaman, and his first spirit was a firestorm. He signed with Yio, in the end. He was disappointed to find her dead, but he will find another. Do you expect yourself to be his equal?"

Malis tried her best to keep her thoughts empty and blank. Her training had prepared her for that. Couldn't let her master know she might have negative thoughts about them. She could not let this elf know who she was contracted with.

Rsja blinked in surprise, "I might have misjudged you, apologies. You have excellent mental discipline. I will watch you. Now, Akheron."

The elf smiled at him, eyes afire, "Shall we begin our test? I will make it simple for you. I know you have no desire to hurt me. That you are even quite attracted. How about this? You care about the lesser beings under you. This is a good thing for a king, but only as far as he can defend them. I will send an army to destroy the city, and you will defend them."

Akheron twitched, "This is between you and me. Don't bring them into this."

"No." Rsja replied, "I'm afraid this is between the Sins, and the whole of reality. You are above them. They do not matter, not one iota. Not a one of them. They are worthless, Akheron. I know you do not see that yet, but you will."

The Fury sighed, his eyes glowing, "I can't talk you out of this."

"No." The elf grinned, teeth sparkling, "If you manage to defend the city for three nights, I will relent. I'll even let you choose a prize. Anything of your choosing. Even... Me. Imagine what the next Sin might think if you have me by your side. Your loyal vassal. They might hesitate before forcing you into the same cruelty that I am."

Malis understood it. She could see how the elf was manipulating him. Trying to force him into taking the crown, whether he wanted to or not. The only way to stop the Sins was to become their king, or kill them all. And killing them might not be possible.

Rsja glared sideways at her, "I am not hiding it. Manipulation would be underhanded. I have already stated the terms, shaman."

She really did not like getting the attention of the elf.

Akheron stood up, "When will this challenge commence?"

"Immediately." Rsja replied, standing up and walking around the table to him. She put a delicate hand on Akheron's shoulder, and leaned in. She sniffed him and shivered, "Yes. I would love to call you, my king."

He brushed her hand off, "You're threatening me, elf. I don't like that. Don't try and come on to me, not right now. Good people are about to die."

Rsja grinned, "Perhaps. But you are desirable, Akheron. I'll leave you. The army is on their way. Try not to disappoint. We have been waiting a very long time for you."

She turned and moved through a shimmer in the air, and Akheron punched the table in front of him. It evaporated into a cloud of sawdust, and Malis fell backwards in surprise and terror.

Astarte put a hand on her brother's back, "Save the anger. You're about to have a target for it. We need to get to the city."

"You go." Akheron shook his head, "The city is already locking down. No doubt Alfar's already told them to get ready for something. Guide them. I'll be in the field. Like the Sin wants."

"That's why you shouldn't be." Astarte snapped.

He glared at her, "We don't have a choice, sister. They will not be forgiving. An elf, trained by our mother, under Hero. There will be no mercy. We have to play this game, at least for now."

Until we know more about the Sins.”

Astarte sighed, “Agreed. Reluctantly. Malis, and you two idiots, with me. You’re not safe outside the walls.”

Charity

It was just a name. All she needed to do was say it. She knew that would get their attention immediately, but she also knew that most people who got their attention died. Quickly.

Alfar might have been trying to kill her, again. But the damned elf knew exactly how to get Charity's interest. She'd never managed to maintain a relationship. People were too freaked out by her power, or too interested in it. She became a tool or a curse.

However, one of the Sins... To them, power might be boring. Or controllable. She might not be a complete mess with one of those beside her. Even this town might be salvageable. This town she should never have summoned.

"Amayo."

He appeared instantly.

The Fae's wings were spread wide, showing off their pink splendour as red dust tumbled from them towards the ground. His intense eyes, pink like hers, were fixed on her. Even his hair was red, blood red. Though, it was cropped short, and spiked.

He grinned at her, so certain he had her complete attention. It wasn't fair. Of course had her attention, she'd summoned him. It had nothing to do with his own jerky appearance.

"Fae can read thoughts, sweetie." He grinned at her, and then nodded at her, "Cute horns."

Charity blushed, and stepped backwards, "You are not what I expected."

The man grinned at her, "And what does an infernal djinn expect when summoning the Sin of Lust to be her boyfriend?"

"Fuck." Charity swore. He could read her thoughts. And he was a total dick about it too. He was somewhat cute, but not the attitude. She'd rather punch him in the balls.

Amayo's wings curled up, and he winced, "Well. That was forceful. Sorry. I was surprised that one of the Nine would be calling for me, and it not be a trap. Let alone a girl who might be interested in me as a partner."

"Freaking Alfar." Charity shook her head, "She said something. It just got into my head."

Amayo shrugged, "I don't know that name. And she knows me? I wonder who she is. A powerful mage to know you as well as I. A djinn. Only powerful mages end up hanging out with your lot, don't they?"

"For the most part." Charity shrugged, "I have other friends, though. Not all of them have magic. A lot of them didn't before they met me."

Amayo laughed, "Sidestep, much. Who is she?"

"An elf." Charity sighed, "A really frustrating elf. Believe me, you're better off not having her attention. She'd annoy the crap out of you."

The man nodded, and sat down, leaning back, looking up at her. Charity blushed as she realised he was checking her out. She swirled the silks around her, keeping things modest whilst teasing him to see his reaction.

"Cute." He shrugged, "But cute alone only ends with sex. I've never had a girlfriend. Nobody except the crazies has tried. See, I tend to... Overpower everyone around me. In fact, it is kind of confusing you aren't all over me."

Charity rolled her eyes, and knelt, “You’re so arrogant. Faen pheromones? Whatever. You’ve never kissed a djinn before, have you? We’re... More than you can handle.”

He leaned forward, “Is that a fact?”

Charity blew her hair in frustration, “No. It’s a test. I’m going to kiss you. And you’re going to try and break the kiss before we end up on my bed.”

She moved over, sitting in his lap, putting her arms around his neck. Her eyes fixed on his. It felt strange to stare into a pair of eyes that were the same as her own. Pink eyes were rare, amongst most species. In humans it meant a prophet, someone who could see through time. In djinn, it meant power. She’d never heard of a Fae with pink eyes.

She kissed him, gently. She immediately felt his neck go tight, as he tried to fight her, but his will was losing. She was gentle, but could already feel him kissing her back, feel him wanting to melt into her embrace, to become hers.

His fingers scratched the floorboards as they tightened, and she probed his teeth with her tongue, drifting over the tops of his fangs, feeling the tiny crenellations used to shred the greenery a Fae is known for eating.

He let out an involuntary moan, and she felt him almost give him. Almost give up to be swallowed up by the feelings washing over him, the desire to be one with her. Yet, his will still held. That was a surprise.

Amayo wrenched his head away, shoving her out of his lap. She hit the ground, stunned. She stared at him, partly for being able to break the kiss, partly for hitting the girl he’d just been making out with.

He breathed out slowly through his nose, “Right. You’re a djinn. I have never felt anything like that before. Holy hells. You said we’d end up having sex, and I believe you... But how does anybody survive that? You’d rip the life right out of them.”

Charity winced. He’d touched a sore spot for her. “My first died. Same with the second. Nearly didn’t have a third. I was just feeling so guilty about it. I tried to resist, really... But, when you care for someone, in the end it sort of just... Happens.”

“I’m sorry.” He said, and it sounded like he really was feeling pity for her. That too, was something she hadn’t expected of a Sin. She expected violence, anger, and destruction. To fight.

“Only if you want to.”

Charity glared at him, “Yeah, that’s not nearly as sexy as you think it is. Don’t read my thoughts.”

“I can’t turn it off.” He sighed, shrugging, “There’s only one Fae stronger with that particular gift than me. Her name was Astrian.”

“One of Trei’s girls.” Charity said slowly, “Are you saying you’re close to her level?”

“Not hearing a whole realm.” He smiled, and then sighed, “But maybe a third of one. I can hear the Western Continent from here. Petty lives. Thieves plotting. Always thinking, those ones. Pickpockets are loud.”

Charity frowned, “Well. Anyway, I hate it. That being said, you can actually resist me. Which is hella sexy. If we were... To have a relationship... How would that work? You’re a Sin, I’m from the Nine. More than that, you’re the Lust. You going to go around kissing other girls?”

Amayo scratched his head, "Huh. I've never thought about that. Having a monogamous relationship. I guess that I've only ever used that stuff to control everyone. A weapon in my arsenal. You'd be making me sheathe my most powerful weapons. Is this an attack, djinn?"

She glared at him, and then turned around. "Go away."

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and he sighed, "Sorry. I guess you hadn't thought of that, either."

"No." She snapped, pulling her silks tight around her, "And I'm kind of hurt you did. At all. I asked you to go. You should. We're enemies, after all. Don't want you to lose your edge."

"We've never even fought before." Amayo complained, "We don't have to be enemies, do we?"

"Destiny is destiny." Charity sighed, "You can't get away from it. I know that way better than most, little jerk. I'm the wish granter."

"That must suck."

Charity sighed heavily, "Fuck. Why do you have to be so nice? Is this how you get the girls? Act all arrogant and then when they try, they break through to something soft underneath?"

"No." Amayo replied, turning around and leaning against her back, "No I get the girls without trying. And the boys. And the things that don't have boys or girls. I get it all. No trying involved. I stink a room up and they all try and jump me, whether I ask them or not."

Charity laughed, "I guess you get about as much of a choice as I do with my magic. Its alive. Does its own thing. I can't even stop it when someone makes a wish. Everything just goes to shit instantly. Nothing good ever comes from it. Well, now and then. Silver linings."

He rested his head on her shoulder, "You know, this is the closest I've ever been to someone and have them stay in control. The Sloth has always been a friend, because he doesn't even realise until I'm gone that he was feeling horny. But I can't touch him. Not without getting a raging stone thrust at me."

"Ew." Charity laughed, "Too much information. I don't need to hear about you having sex with a troll."

He joined her laughing, "Probably true. Sorry."

"So horny." She teased, "Of course they call you 'Lust'."

He turned his head towards her, "You deserve the title. I'm still craving you. That was nuts. I've never kissed anybody like that. Is that what people feel around me?"

"Nope." She laughed, "Imagine being one of my mortal friends. What they get to feel when we make out."

He shivered, "Intense. I do kinda want to feel that. Imagining it is not great for self control."

She turned her head, "And? The first kiss was the test. You passed. Don't you want to be my boyfriend?"

Temperance

She sat up slowly, stretching. The huntress was still nearby, still just a soul bound to a body she couldn't return to without help. Help that Kao seemed determined to stop. Temperance wasn't about to bait a goddess known for her temper.

She let the knife she'd heard unsheathing bounce off her face. The scales that covered her skin might be little more than a semi-translucent blue, but they should have been obvious to any warrior of calibre.

She looked at him disappointed, "Is that all?"

"Nothing else I have would do much more than annoy you." The man in the cloak replied, "I got rather burned on the way in. Your magic is a little more... Resilient, than I have dealt with before. Hard to untangle."

Temperance shrugged, "So. The Hunters' Guild finally sent someone they thought was worth a damn. So, how do I stack up?"

"We're doomed if you get annoyed with us." The hunter replied easily with a shrug, "Are you?"

"Extremely." Temperance replied, "You stole my gems. Or forced the Kai to. Whoever was doing it was aware there was a sleep wyrm on top. They'd started taking from right bloody next to me. I've tried to be patient about this. But stealing from a wyrm, any wyrm, is a stupid idea."

"Can't you make more?"

Temperance glared at him, "Mine are natural. I'm going to try and believe you don't know that we see a difference. Magic-grown crystals are just pretty stones to me. Not worth a damn. I spent hundreds of years gathering those. And you took them."

The hunter held up his hands, "Sorry. I haven't read the wyrm etiquette book. I don't think anyone has, for a very long time."

"Thanks for reminding me I'm a freak." Temperance muttered, and she shook her head, "Look, just tell your bosses to fuck off, and think about how they're going to repay me. Because when I get bored of roosting over the bakery, I am coming to collect."

The hunter winced, "Ouch. Well, I'm sorry you didn't recognise me. I am the bosses, so I can't quite tell myself to fuck off. What kind of repayment do you think you'll get?"

"Blood and bone." Temperance smiled, flashing her fangs, "As is tradition. I'd prefer something a little prettier, but y'all are assholes."

The hunter spread his hands, "You can't kill us all. Eventually, the Guild will bring you to ground. There is always a dragon hunter. Dragons always fall. There's a reason so few of you are left."

"There is, but that isn't it." Temperance laughed, "Most of them left. They went across the Void, to the Idling Lands, beyond the vision of the gods. You might call that dead. But I wouldn't call it a dragonslayer. I've known a few of those, in my time. You didn't even ask my name, hunter."

"Mine's Tomas." He replied, "Why would I care what yours is?"

She grinned at him, laughing, "Temperance. The blonde frostwyrm. Come on. I already know stories of me have stuck around."

Tomas glared at her, "Yeah, right."

“Ever heard of another blonde frostwurm ever being born?” She raised an eyebrow, “It ain’t something genetic. Blonde fur is rare. It requires you be stillborn, and survive. Nobody else had the luck to have an elfin midwife.”

The hunter didn’t say anything. He was sizing her up, considering how best to kill her. She could see his thoughts flashing clearly across his undisciplined aura. It was pathetic.

She caught the fireball in her teeth, held it there, without breaking the spell. Slowly draining the magic out of him, as the little magic he had stored in a crystal disappeared.

She smiled at him around it. He couldn’t release the spell, all he could do was try and attack, to try and break her concentration. The only problem with that is that he knew she would fight back, and she might break him instead.

Four knives flashed through the air. She shattered the fireball in her jaws as she spun, trying to avoid the one she could smell. It stank of corrupted magic. The Fel. That was one thing she wasn’t about to press her luck with.

“Oh enough!” A voice snapped as something appeared, grabbing one of the knives out of the air. The something was formless. It might have arms. Uncountable, and down to one. It was both at the same time. Overlapping forms. Existing simultaneously, and exclusively.

Other parts of the form came and went. The bones of skeleton, the flesh of a woman. Hints at something living, and not just a nightmare born into the world through its own determination.

Temperance bowed respectfully, “Goddess.”

The hunter glared at the newcomer, “God? If you hadn’t noticed, humanity doesn’t have a need of gods. Not anymore. You and yours aren’t accepted around here.”

“Shut up.” The ever-changing creature said with irritation, “If it weren’t for me you would all be dead a dozen times over. The gods are still here, human. And if you hadn’t noticed, the lifestream belongs to us. It is us, in a way. Now, be silent, and stop attacking people I do care about.”

She turned her gaze to Temperance, who bowed even lower.

The goddess chuckled at that, “Stand. I don’t ask any woman to bow to me. Not ever. Least of all, one of the Nine. My Nine favourite girls. The unbreakables. You don’t bow. Not to anyone, not ever.”

Temperance stood up slowly, smiling, “Coming from you, I am not sure how to feel.”

The form warped as it chuckled, into impossible shapes that made her feel queasy, “That’s cute, Temperance. Extremely. Also intelligent. If I have your attention, then it probably means you will have issues, and soon. And you will. You were awoken for a purpose. The Heir to the Halls of the Hells has been found.”

Her teeth ground together, and her breathing became extremely even and controlled. She could feel the instinct to fight rising up in her. Not like when she’d faced her skirmishes in this town. They hadn’t earned her attention like this.

The goddess nodded slowly, “Yeah. You don’t have time to play with the humans like this. That is not the purpose of the Nine! You have world-leveling concerns. So, if you must deal with them, do it already. Burn this city to the ground, and move on.”

The hunter stared at her, “What?”

"You are unimportant, mortal." The goddess snapped, "The wyrm has every right to take your lives for taking what you knew was hers. Didn't we send you a prophet? To warn you? You ignored the gods. Your lives are forfeit."

Temperance sighed, "It has been a long time since I killed anyone who wasn't trying to kill me."

"Then leave." The goddess shrugged in a hideous number of transformations, "I don't care one way or the other. The only other person here, who is important, is Mabeline."

The ghost pricked up, looking at the goddess in surprise, "I'm important? Then why won't you let me go back?"

The goddess sighed, turning to her, "I've forced you to remain in spirit, so that you began to understand the stakes. I want you to remember Temperance, and the Nine. I also don't want you to tell anyone. Alfar already knows. Alfar already knew, always. If you tell anyone else, then the Sins will realise too early on. You have to keep this secret. Don't warn them that the Frosthammer is about to descend on Adairoft."

The ghost nodded, and then vanished with a flick of the goddess' wrist. "I've sent her back. She'll wake up soon, in that tiny little shop. She'll be safe with Alfar, for now. Things are coming that even that elf won't be able to save them. That's why you will be gathering the Nine."

Temperance screwed up her face, "Me? What about Hope? And Faith?"

"Faith is trapped in an eternity crystal, by the Wrath." The goddess sighed, "Hope... No one has seen or heard of Hope since you went to sleep. No god, no spirit, no infernal. No elf or Fae. She's gone."

Temperance felt faint. Those two were the lynchpin of the Nine. Without them, they were just a bunch of high class amateurs. They needed Faith's guidance above everything. Her power and knowledge was everything to them.

Hope was even more important. She kept them in check, keeping them from doing things they would regret for the rest of their lives. She also kept them fighting, when they saw no need or point to keep going.

If they were gone, and the Nine only had her for leadership, then they were all screwed. She didn't have what it would take to keep them together, let alone keep them united against the Sins.

"What can you tell me, goddess?"

She sighed, "Not much. Some of you are already in position, thanks to the elfin eternity. All are awake. If Hope is still alive, she too will be awake. There are places beyond the vision of the gods. There always have been. Anything I say about her will come off as a pun, so let's leave it at that."

The wyrm sighed, sitting down on her pile of precious stones, "Can you tell me who you would go looking for first?"

"Mercy." The goddess smiled, "Look for Mercy. With her, you have a chance. A chance to do some good."

Temperance sighed, "Zanfir. That's a heck of an empire to go searching for their mythical Witchqueen in. Mercy was a rogue. She went wherever she liked. Most of us were like that. No permanent homes. No places we liked more than any other."

The goddess sighed heavily, "I've already got a lecture and a faceful of Faen dust waiting for

me when I get back. I shouldn't be helping. I guess... Fine. You're not going to get it. Look in Bocheon, on the border between Zafir Northern, and Falenthia. You'll find a trace."

The goddess vanished in a burst of black flames. Hellfire.

Temperance winced. She would not have wanted to piss off Trei like that. Though, hellfire wasn't exactly his domain. No, that was more the domain of the new goddess of chaos. Kru.

Temperance did not like the feeling she was doing what Kru might want. But she didn't have a lot of choice.

She ignored the hunter's next attack, allowing the magic of her home to grab and displace him several hundred paces above the roof of the Guild's pretty blue roof. It was cruel, but it was a message.

Astarte

She didn't even bother waiting to ask when they got to the wall, she grabbed the other two and jumped up to the top. She let go of them and motioned, "Go to Alfar's Spice. You should be safer there."

She turned and glared at a soldier until he lowered his sword, uncertainly. "Where's the captain?"

"He's at the keep, defending the inner wall." The soldier said nervously.

Astarte rolled her eyes, "Fucking asshole. Who is in charge up here, then?"

"Nobody." The soldier shrugged, "We just have orders to hold."

"You have an army of the horizon!" Astarte growled, pointing towards the Wildlands. Sure enough, a dust cloud could be seen. A dust cloud that contained a terror-driven group of goblins.

She turned and cracked her neck, "Fine. I'll defend your stupid asses, but I need someone who can organise a decent defence. No plan outlives first contact with the enemy. We need four commanders, for each of the walls. Can somebody sort that out?"

The soldier winced, "Technically, I can't do anything you say."

"Technically I can turn your body inside out and use it as a marionette without killing you." Astarte replied.

The soldier sheathed his sword and ran off. She didn't know if it was to gather people to attack her, or if it was to do what she wanted. She didn't care. Her eyes were focused at the edge of Old Water, where she could just see her brother, walking towards the Wildlands.

Akheron was angry, which was good. However, he might be too angry. The Sin knew what she was doing. How to hurt him in all the right places. If Akheron unleashed what he was fully capable of, then he wouldn't be saving the city. He would be dooming it.

Nothing would live, if he let himself go. No plantlife, no animals. Everything in the area would die, and it wouldn't come back again. The city would die slower, but it would still die.

She was very scared that by the end of this, the Sin would succeed. That they would turn her brother into what they wanted him to be. That Akheron would lose himself.

He had always been a creature of chaos. Always wanted to channel all his power into one amazing strike against anything. He was a Fury, just like she was. They craved the sound of breaking bones, tearing sinews. The screams as things died by their hands.

She swallowed the saliva building in her mouth, struggling to keep her essence suppressed. No mortal will could survive looking at her, and truly seeing what she was. Most eternal wills would also falter.

"Bad Fury."

Astarte turned, smiling, "Alfar."

"I can't stay." The elf replied, and grabbed her in a hug, "I came to wish you. To wish luck, and control. You're not allowed to lose either."

Astarte squeezed her back, "I'll do my best. What about you?"

"She can't know I exist." Alfar replied, holding on, "If she does, we lose Akheron."

Astarte pulled back, blinking, "Wait. So he does like you?"

Alfar blushed, "I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did." Astarte laughed, "You're his deepest desire. The elf will give you to him, and he'll accept her."

"Worse." Alfar shivered, and then smiled weakly, "Can't let it happen. I'll hide at the teahouse. Until I'm needed. When the fires happened."

Astarte's face took on a grim aspect, "This is going to suck, isn't it?"

"Suck balls." Alfar nodded, "Suck them dry. The king should behave, for a while. Be careful. We will have needed you."

Astarte gave her another quick hug, and turned back, "I will. But right now, Akheron is more of a concern."

Alfar disappeared without another word. Astarte was surprised, but only for a moment. The reason for the sudden and uncharacteristic departure was obvious enough.

On one of the houses below, in Old Water, an elf was standing, and watching. She was tempted to attack the woman, except she had a feeling she wasn't a threat to her. That all she'd do was annoy her.

She needed to know more of what she was up against before she took her head-on.

Astarte turned around, looking at the small group milling around bored on the ground. She ground her fangs together, and then barked. "Archers, form up! Pikes, front and centre. Guard that fucking gate!"

The group looked up at her in confusion, and her eyes flashed, "You will properly form up or I will personally shitfucking thrash you to within a inch of your life!"

It worked. They all began to move mechanically into position, their training kicking in. A soldier beside her laughed, "Well done."

"When you know the language, everything falls into place." Astarte said with a snarl, and turned back around, and her eyes widened as she felt the surge of emotion inside her head, and the sudden drop in mana around them. "Brace!"

The soldiers didn't get a chance to understand her order, not in time. The horizon lit up with a massive flash of red and yellow, a plume of fire rising into the air, higher than the wall. A moment later the shockwave from the explosion hit them, knocking most of the soldiers to the ground.

Astarte smiled grimly as she felt the ground rock beneath her. That was her brother, all over. Starting out small. Relishing the experience.

"What the godsdamn was that?" The soldier asked in awe.

Astarte nodded, "Our first line of defence, my brother. Akheron, the Trauma. Now you know where he gets the name from."

She felt guilty about Mabeline. She hadn't had a spare arm to carry the recovering and sleeping hunter, so they'd left her at Mike's. It was quite possible she had just woken up, alone and bloodstained, with the world shaking around her.

They were going to miss her if she didn't join them at the wall before this was over. Her calamity was just the kind of thing to work against an entire army.

"Brace!" Astarte shouted again, and this time she heard the soldiers snapping into movement, a moment before the light on the horizon blinded them and the ground slammed into them as they

were still blinking furiously.

Astarte put a foot up on the wall, leaning forward as she looked at the horizon. Akheron was in retreat, already. The number of goblins swarming towards him didn't make sense, not after two devastating attacks of that scale.

Not hundreds. Thousands. Not a single one even intimidated by watching hundreds of their brethren ripped to shreds. These goblins weren't thinking. Usually, they would be easy to intimidate, to scare into running away. Goblins didn't like a fight that they might lose.

Whatever the Sin had done to drive them here was overpowering every natural instinct that they had. If they were to survive this, then she would have to discover what it was, and undo it.

Astarte spread her hands, "Archers, at the ready."

Then she put both her hands up, and dozens of fireballs began launching from around her, crashing down around her brother. Giving him the space to turn and run towards them.

Akheron appeared on the wall, sweating. He was bleeding, scratched. Nothing serious, but nothing worth ignoring either.

Astarte yelled to the crowd, "Nurse!"

Her eyes were focused on the horizon, on the mana burning through her and into the air around her, as she ignited and propelled it. Her idiot brother would have to take care of himself for a moment.

He'd bought them time. It would have to be enough.

Mikhael

“Sit down.” Alfar complained, glaring at him. He reluctantly agreed. Not for her sake, but for his own. Because the hellhound in the corner of the store was watching him hungrily, and it looked like it had flesh stuck in its teeth.

The town eccentric. That was how Mikhael had always thought of Alfar. Like most people, he’d avoided her. She acted strangely, and it was always a complete surprise when she lashed out with incredible violence.

Her pet ate people. That was not normal.

The insane elf, smiling and bouncing around, didn’t seem to even try and discourage the monstrous creature from devouring anyone and anything. Mikhael didn’t think she saw a problem with it. Which was terrifying.

It was as if someone had placed a weapon of mass destruction into the hands of a toddler. Of course the toddler was going to bloody use it.

“Keep thinking of me that way and I’ll have cut off your balls and fed them to you.” Alfar snapped from where she was laying out sheets on a bench, preparing to dry some tea leaves.

Mikhael was even more disturbed. He had not a single doubt in his mind that Alfar would do as she threatened. Which, in itself, was not normal. He’d dealt with adventurers who did carry through with threats like that. They were mostly assholes that nobody minded when they were dead.

“Sorry.” Alfar sighed heavily, wiping her forehead with her arm, hands fully of wet tea. “Alteo helps me. Balances me. It’s hard to know how people are supposed to behave, for me. Alteo is gone now. I think it’s been a while.”

Mikhael looked at her in surprise, “Who was Alteo?”

“First Sibyl of the Oracle of Mishia.” Alfar said proudly, “And... She... Is... Was... Was. She was like a big sister to me. Helped me remember things. Like my birthday. I truly have no idea how old I am now. I... I don’t experience time linearly. A year may pass for you, and a day for me, or vice versa. Alteo helped me keep track.”

He stayed silent. He didn’t think he could say much to reassure a woman who had lost her best friend in the whole world, and didn’t even know it was a hundred years ago. That the Oracle of Mishia had been disbanded when Falenthia invaded, and enslaved the entire country.

“Alteo died, saving us.” Alfar bit her lip, blinking back tears. “She died smiling. She saved Antoinette. She was like you. Antoinette loved Shannon. High Priestess of Ozandius. She became queen. She was also a pseualf. That’s why she could break open the door. To help us stop Pheter.”

Mikhael sighed heavily, “You really did fight Pheter, didn’t you? These aren’t just insane ramblings. You know gods. Do you have any idea how incredible that is?”

Alfar laughed, and nodded to the girl sitting quietly by the fire, hiding around the edge of the chimney from the hellhound. “Ask Malis. I don’t think of them as gods. I knew them before they were. Sometimes when they weren’t.”

Mikhael turned his head to the waitress. She was building up the courage to attempt to pat the hellhound. Which he found slightly suicidal, but it was her life now. Maybe the dog would like her. “What about her?”

Alfar giggled, "That's hers. I shouldn't say."

Mikhael shook his head. She was still a bloody eccentric. Though, perhaps not without reason. If she really did see the whole of reality, all of the time, it was astonishing that she was as sane as she was.

She was just an elf. She might be more magical than humans, and she was certainly stronger, but she wasn't a celestial spirit. Not some ancient power breathed into being by belief, and held there by sheer stubborn willpower. There was no possible way that seeing all of reality could be possible for her.

"It was." Alfar interrupted his thoughts again, "Before Ausosa. I can remember that clearly. That bitch will curse me. Take my mind from me. Just because she wanted to win. Aur killed her. When she will wake up."

Mikhael just nodded. He didn't know how to picture Alfar before the curse. He also didn't know what to make of the fact she was cursed by the one who caused the Godless Night. The Fae who had become powerful enough to kill all the gods and seize control of the lifestream itself.

He hadn't wanted to admit it. It didn't make sense that Alfar was on speaking terms with the gods. He'd thought it might be possible, but he hadn't believed it was possible. It was still insane. Even before the Godless Night, the gods rarely interacted with people. Even their chosen champions usually only met them once, and that was it.

Alfar wasn't anybody's champion, and she knew multiple gods. She was on speaking terms with them, even after Trei sealed the gods off in the Void, and decreed that only champions would be used.

Alfar blinked, and looked over at a clock on the wall, "Is it that late? Aur is supposed to arrive."

Mikhael didn't get a chance to ask the question on his mind. There was a flash of steam, and he stared in absolute wonder at the two people shaking their cloaks in front of the fire.

One of them hung it up, tossing it towards the rack by the door without looking, and turned around grinning. "Alfar!"

"Aur!" The elf squealed and jumped into her arms, cuddling into her. The woman had short-cropped blonde hair. Very short, in a military style. Her eyes, on the other hand, were far more surprising. They were dead white.

Mikhael swallowed nervously, and Alfar stepped back, "Sorry. Aur, this is Mikhael, and Malis. She's cute. She likes Garmr."

Aurili waved to the terrified ex-slave, and then glared coolly over at him. "Mikhael. That name rings a bell. Any ideas why I might have heard of you?"

He swallowed nervously, "None. I run a tavern. Goddess."

The goddess of war nodded slowly, and turned back, "I'll remember eventually. Mikhael of Adairoft. I'm sure I know it. Oh well. This is Lilibeth."

The other woman's hair was longer, brunette waves moving down to her shoulders. However, her eyes were startling. A bright pink. He'd never seen any like it before, but got the impression if he asked, he'd die.

Lilibeth smiled over at him, "Interesting. Is he here for a fight, Alfar? He might be fun. Strong enough. Is he flexible?"

Aurili punched her girlfriend's shoulder, "Behave. Just because he's wetting himself in terror."

Lilibeth poked her tongue out at her, and Aurili took advantage of it, grabbing her in a deep kiss.

Mikhael heard Malis squeak in surprise. He hadn't been entirely clear on that front. Explaining love and attraction wasn't something he'd ever expected to have to do. Explaining that it didn't care about gender or if you could give birth was something he hadn't got to before Malis was too embarrassed to continue.

Aurili breathed in deeply as she broke the kiss, and then grinned, "So. Tea?"

Alfar shrugged, "I have some brewing. There's something important though. What am I forgetting?"

"The city on lockdown?" Malis exclaimed in surprise, "The Sin on our doorstep?"

Aurili sighed, glancing at her, "Huh. So you're who got everyone hyped up. I can see why. Barely out of chains and already willing to interrupt gods. I like you. Too bad you liked Kao more. Alfar already knows my answer to all that. I'm not allowed to interfere, Malis. Sorry. The Sins aren't celestial. Waking them wasn't done by a celestial either."

Alfar winced, and Mikhael glared at her, "You said they woke up when Pheter did."

Lilibeth sat down at a table, taking a multi-coloured freckle cookie from a jar, "Yeah, but that wasn't the gods. That's because an elf broke the rules. She messed with time. Didn't you?"

Alfar pouted, "You would tell him."

"I did." Lilibeth grinned, "And I'm sure you remember it with as much happiness."

"Is this because I walked in on you and Aurili last time?" Alfar moaned, and Lilibeth shrugged, "It might have something to do with that. But that was over a month ago."

Aurili held up her hands, "Diplomacy. Yes, Alfar is responsible for the Sin awakening, Mikhael. If she hadn't, then Pheter would have won. So the gods do owe her, something. But we're not allowed to directly interfere. So we're doing the small stuff, like helping out Malis."

Mikhael turned his eye to the girl, who was trying not to move. The hellhound had stretched out a paw and dropped it into her lap. The creature was suddenly much less scary than the other people in the room. He was positively benign.

Aurili waved at a seat, "Come on you two. Want to play cards?"

Alfar tapped her chin, "We have time for one game. Only one. Then they'll have to help out Astarte."

Mikhael shook his head, "I am not playing cards whilst an army attacks the city. I am not immortal like all of you. I have a soul to lose."

Lilibeth glared at him, "Now I remember. Aur, this is the jerk that Alfar was telling us about. The fields on fire."

"The razing of Adairoft." Aurili nodded, and turned, glaring at him, "In that case, you best survive this army. How would you like one of my swords?"

He stared at her, "I haven't been a hunter in a very long time."

"I haven't been a god for a very long time." She shrugged, "So we're a fit."

She drew a sword from her back, and tossed it to the floor in front of him where it landed with a heavy clatter. "Kill some goblins for me. Make me proud."

Akheron

His ears were ringing. The inner folds had closed, but even for him this was too much. His chest hurt from where the shockwaves had hit him, rolled through him. He could fire off dozens of explosions, but by the time he was ready for his next assault the bodies were already buried beneath the scampering feet of their terrified compatriots.

He could smell their fear. It stank, filling the air. He knew he terrified them, but the Sin, as delicate looking as she was, scared them more. He'd felt her, as she sat across from him at the tavern. He was scared of her.

People could feel it when he ripped the mana out of the air, out of every living thing, to fuel his magic. People could feel weak, and fall. That was when he drew on his magic. When he was still, there was a presence of mana around him. Gathered around him.

When he had sat opposite the elf, the mana had gathered around her instead. It had pulled away from him, for the first time in his life. That had sent a chill down his spine. Kept him talking, instead of simply killing her. If she had that much magic, he might not even be able to kill her. He was a Fury. Even his physical strength was rooted in magic.

He jumped atop the wall, landing beside his sister. He turned back and let loose. He ripped the mana from the hands of the shamen amongst the goblins. Tore it out of the air. The magic coursed into him, igniting him. The fire burned in his veins as his eyes lit up, as he felt home.

He took their lives from them. Took what belonged to him. The magic ripped out of them. Their hearts stopped. Their cells stopped splitting. They died, instantly. Every part of them died as he took their power from them. Took the life from the ground beneath them.

Astarte looked over at him, "Whoa. What are you doing, Akheron?"

"Ex'pa!" He shouted angrily. His voice slapped into reality, becoming a tornado of power. The mana flowed through him, linking him as a conduit to the lifestream. The magic took shape slowly, as the wind became a storm, cracking thunder overhead. A spark of magic flew forward. A single spark, containing all of the compressed magic.

He clapped his hands over his ears as the spark instantly expanded, becoming a fireball of wrath that broke the air. Every window in the city would have shattered as the concussion washed over them. The heat of the flames were enough to blacken his clothes. He could see the humans falling around him. Weak flesh, blistering in the intensity of what he had created.

He could feel Astarte in his head. She was concerned about him. The humans meant as little to her as to him, her concern lay elsewhere. He didn't care to explore it. Didn't want to know what he already knew.

Akheron frowned. The army had stopped. They were still spreading out, surrounding the city, but they weren't about to swarm the walls. This was different. He hadn't scared them into submission. The smell hadn't changed, well not from them. The humans reeked of true fear now.

Astarte growled, "She asked them to."

He followed her gaze, looking at the elf perched atop one of the buildings, and sighed heavily. "I think she wants to talk, again."

"Only with you." Astarte cautioned, "She wants me out of the picture."

Akheron laughed and elbowed his sister, "Of course. You keep me grounded. I'm not quite so thick I haven't noticed her trying to manipulate me."

“Just thick enough to miss the jealousy.” Astarte grinned.

He looked at her grinning cheekily, “Say what?”

Astarte rolled her eyes, “Oh kregstad. You’re thick, aren’t you? The elf is coming onto you, being all over you, because she can smell another elf on you. She’s jealous. She wants the future king to be hers.”

Akheron felt his brain tick over for an excruciating moment and then he blinked, “Why would she care if she smelled Alfar on me? I’ve talked to plenty of people. Like Mabeline.”

“Alfar’s different.” Astarte laughed, “Take a whiff of yourself, brother. Alfar smells different than that psycho.”

He indulged his sister, trying to separate the various scents in his head from the maelstrom of a battle. The sweat of the nervous humans, only holding back because they were too afraid to attack. The humour of his sister. He found Alfar’s fading scent eventually. It was bright, smelling faintly of tea and mint. There was a trace of oil, from the hellhound. For the most part, Alfar’s scent made him think of her smile. Bright and bubbly.

He shrugged.

“Kregstad.” Astarte swore, “You are so thick. Alfar likes you. She has the hots for you, and I can smell it on you. She gave me a hug. She did not smell the same way for me.”

She was right. Alfar did not smell the same way on her. There were undercurrents to the scene on Astarte. Things that reminded him of a warrior. Traces of death, and anger.

That was why Alfar’s scent on himself was so bright. There were no undercurrents. Everyone had undercurrents. A darker side to themselves. It was absent when Alfar was with him. That was news. Maybe there was a chance the elf liked him.

She had kissed his cheek.

Astarte grinned at him, “What? What were you just thinking?”

Akheron sighed and ran a nervous hand through his hair. “Eh... Alfar thanked me earlier. Kissed my cheek. Not sure what to make of it.”

“If you want it to be more, you have to step up, Akr.” Astarte said with frustration, “Look, I know you are brand new to this whole thing, but there is no way an elf who can see through time thinks that you are their only option. Don’t let the opportunity go.”

“Are you two really discussing dating advice?” A soldier nearby asked, peeking over the wall.

Akheron sighed, “I’m afraid dating advice might be able to end this. Astarte, I might have to play into the Sin’s hands. Which is going to hurt Alfar. I don’t know how she’ll react.”

Astarte shook her head, “Don’t. We can’t let the Sin think she’s winning. Not even for a moment. Right now, you have all the cards. You might not feel like it, but she’s the one looking for something she wants, and you have it.”

“She’ll kill the city.” Akheron replied grimly, “Right now, we’re on even footing. I’m sorry, sister. I’ll speak to her. Alone.”

He jumped, rippling through the dimension, feeling at peace as the Void passed around him. The darkness, and the quiet. Alone in the empty space between reality, the light of Trei’s castle somewhere behind him.

He hit the rooftop lightly, and smiled, “Impressive. The size of this army is quite ridiculous.”

Rsja grinned at him, walking over and placing a hand against his chest, "Yet, you're not breathing hard yet. Barely beginning to tap what you're capable of. That is something... I would love to see."

Akheron glared at her, "Not here. They are still my people."

The elf considered for a moment, "Agreed. You have passed the first test."

She leaned in, whispering in his ear, "I can see your desire. Your conflict."

Akheron pushed her away, "What can you see, elf?"

"Your heart." She laughed, the diamonds in her fangs flashing in the sunlight, "There's another. But I'm in your heart, aren't I? I wonder who I'm competing with."

Akheron glared at her, "May the two of you never meet."

The elf looked disappointed, and then flicked her hair, "If that is your wish, it will be so, my king. I would never disobey you. It is time for the second test, of three. The three I will give you."

Akheron sighed, "What hell will you unleash this time?"

"This time, you will." Rsja replied, "You are the heir to hell. You will summon a hellhound."

Akheron blinked in surprise, "Is that all?"

Rsja looked at him curiously, "You know the name of a hellhound already. Curious. Unfortunately, it is a particular hellhound I want you to summon. I'll even give you his name. But he won't come, unless he respects you. If he doesn't, he may ignore you, or attack you."

The elf turned, "The army will remain. The city will be my assurance that you won't become... Distracted."

He watched her walk through reality, and traced it easily. He was tempted to follow her, but he knew that he had a terrified city to deal with first. That was politics. And politics was what it really meant to be a king.

Alfar

He walked through her doors, just like she remembered. Tall and confident, holding a weakened huntress. He barely seemed to see her, and she could barely stand up. He only had eyes for herself.

Akheron didn't seem to see anything else. The archers filling the square behind him. The soldiers patrolling. He didn't see the two people desperately staring at him for assurance.

He was strong. He had changed, like she remembered he had. He'd given up the role of just an adventurer. He wasn't the man who traded a wolf's head for some coin, desperate to pay off a bank. He was now the man who could destroy a city, and was willing to if it was necessary.

He was in-between now. Neither the child, too innocent to understand the havoc he caused, nor the monster who brought hell in his wake. He was strong, terrifying, but he hadn't quite lost his kindness. He still cared about her.

Mabeline limped beside the fire, where Alfar put down a tray for her, with special cookies. Freshly baked, the chocolate still melting. She'd stepped through time to put the tray down. Because she was too fixated to move, right now.

She could barely breathe, as she watched him. Watched that confident Fury, walk slowly over to her, smiling sheepishly. He had faced an army that had flooded the ground, but it was her that made him nervous.

Akheron swallowed, and she saw his tail beginning to shake around his waist, "Alfar. Thank you. For the warning."

She couldn't smile back. Couldn't move. She was too scared. She could remember this moment, and what it would mean. She hated herself for it. Hated that she was too scared to talk, when he did it. For the first time in his life.

"Alfar... Say something." Akheron said, barely breathing. He was nervous. His face beginning to flush as she stared at him.

She could feel Garmr beginning to get concerned. The hellhound was beginning to consider if Akheron was a threat to his master's happiness. Consider if she would be pleased or angry if he attacked him.

"What..." Alfar began, and then just like her memory, she panicked. "Does the elf want you to do?"

Akheron sighed. It sounded like relief. Alfar knew better. That she had hurt him by not saying what he wanted to hear. Not giving him a hint that there was even a chance that the reason she couldn't breathe, was him.

That it would always be him. As much as she tried to push him away, as much as she tried to deny her destiny, it was him. He was going to break her heart. But she loved him. Every moment they were together.

"She wants me to summon a hellhound. A particular hellhound. She said she'd tell me the name, but I guess we have a breather before then." Akheron winced, "The city is a hostage. The goblins are going to stay, and I have no clue how she got so many. More than there should be."

Alfar turned away from him, it was easier to think if she didn't have to stare into those eyes of his. "She cheated. I'm not the only one who can be in more than one place."

Akheron put an arm around her shoulders, being way too familiar. Probably thinking he was

being reassuring. He wasn't. His touch was electrifying. Reminding her of how his scales burned her. Tantalising pinpricks of fire.

"I need you, Alfar. I... Are you pushing me away? We need you. There is no going up against a Sin. I have to play her game, and I don't want to win it. I don't want to be the heir of hell. Whatever that means." Akheron spoke, concerned. Terrified. Scared that the Sin had already won.

Alfar smiled sheepishly, holding up a freckled biscuit. "These are different. Made just for a Fury."

Akheron took his arm off her as he picked up the biscuit. He turned it over, "It smells different. Like there's a spice to it."

"Not spice." Alfar said, turning and pushing the biscuit onto the edge of his fangs. He smiled at her as he took a bit. She smiled cheekily, "Fire."

Akheron smiled, and Alfar walked passed him, sitting down next to Mabeline. Her heart was going out of control, and she didn't like it. Didn't like that a smile from him could control everything about her. Make her do things.

Akheron smiled, and Alfar would do anything he asked. It scared her, that she was so hopeless in front of him.

She smiled at the hunter, "Good to have you back."

Mabeline looked at her, "That troll. That was your way of tying me to them. And the Guild went after me for it. I am not happy with you. I don't like you. You have betrayed everything there ever was between us, Alfar."

Alfar sighed, "No, Mabeline. No I didn't. I made you tea. I gave you a job. You were already tied to Akheron. Marked. The Guild let you join because he knew you were tied to Akheron, by a dick of a Fate. Because, the man who leads the Guild, who established it in the first place, is a Sin."

The hunter swallowed nervously, "Say what? How am I tied to him?"

Alfar looked over, "Akr, go find somewhere else to be. Calm down the Vizier or something. This is girl talk."

The Fury rolled his eyes and left, but Alfar noticed he had a second one of the biscuits she'd made just for him in his hand. He liked them. It was almost enough to make her cry.

She turned back, "You kissed Akheron. Soon. Because, quite frankly, you adore that idiot."

Mabeline winced as if she'd been hit. "I like him, sure. He's sexy, and powerful. That doesn't mean I'm going to be stupid and throw my lot in with him."

"Daitis is the Fate." Alfar shrugged, "If you want to know. He tied you to Akheron years ago. Your soul wants to be his. You don't have a choice Mae. You have already kissed Akr."

Mabeline looked at her nervously, "This being girl talk... You like him, don't you?"

"He's my destiny." Alfar shrugged, bursting into tears. "I don't want him to be. He hurts me. He breaks up with me. I already know it. He hurts me in a way I never recover from."

The huntress winced, "You know it. So can't you fix it?"

"No." Alfar swallowed, "I will push him away for so long I nearly lose him... But Mae... I am crazy about him. Everything about Akr. His obsession with explosion magic. The way he throws

himself in front of anyone that might get hurt. He doesn't care if he even knows them. The way he smiles as he drinks his tea. The way he actually likes my cooking."

"He hasn't really done any of that yet, has he?"

"He has." Alfar sighed, "Just like he's broken my heart. It isn't a vision with me, Mae. I remember, because I've already lived it. Not because I inherited the memory. Because I am living it."

Mabeline tapped her fingers on the table, "Say... When I kiss him... Are you going to slap me?"

"So hard." Alfar laughed, "I knocked you off your feet. You didn't think I'd even notice. You forget, I am everywhere I want to be."

The huntress shook her head, "I'm Kao's champion. And I missed the war. Why exactly am I going to continue to be caught up in this? There's no glory for me. No worship for Kao. Akheron can take care of his own problems. I don't feel like bleeding out on his doorstep again."

Alfar shrugged, and looked over her shoulder, "Malis. Izak. Garmr. None of them want to be involved either. Well, Malis kinda does. Daitis is a jerk. I just want to eat a freckle biscuit and sleep. But I don't. None of us get what we want. Not now. I had a hundred years of peace. That's over. There is no more peace."

Mabeline swallowed nervously, "How long does this chaos last?"

"Forever." Alfar replied, wiping the tears from her cheeks with frustration, "It doesn't end, Mae. Until this world ends. From now on, there is only chaos."

The huntress picked up the biscuit from her tray, "No more tea and biscuits?"

"Alfar's Spice will last for an eternity." She growled, "I won't let anyone take that from me. Not ever. Which is why the inside of the shop isn't the outside."

Mabeline blinked, "Huh?"

"Inside is smaller than outside." Alfar said, frowning with concern. "Because it's really hard to maintain a realm. I thought it was easy. All the Fae do it. Well, some of them. Like Summer did. She made it ridiculously easy. Even separated her realm from the Void, to protect Trei, once."

Mabeline coughed nervously, "Wait. The inside of this shop is in its own dimension? And you're holding it? That takes a fuckload of magic, Alfar. Where are you getting it from?"

Alfar laughed, "Really? You have more magic than me, Mae. From your mum. I just borrow it from myself. A moment of time, frozen. The same moment, over and over. Its hard, but easier than holding the realm with just the magic I have."

The huntress glared, "My mum? What the heck do you mean by that?"

"Kao." Alfar blinked, "Oh. I hadn't told you yet. This is when I told you. You're not her champion."

Mabeline stood up angrily, "I am not her daughter. My mother and my father were farmers. They were murdered by goblins. That's why I became a hunter."

Alfar rolled her eyes, "Just because you kissed my boyfriend doesn't mean I'm being vindictive, Mae. Your mum loves you, but she isn't allowed to visit. Trei found out. Told off Wintralassa and Kao. Told them to mirage you."

Mabeline glared, "Mirage? Covering up one memory with another. If you're telling me the truth... That's a spell you offer to break. Right? So do it. Show me you're telling the truth."

Alfar smiled weakly, “Drink your tea.”

Mabeline lifted up the porcelain, “Fuck. You always knowing the future is fucking irritating, Alfar.”

“Not like I want to.” She pouted, “I have to witness you kissing him. Have to watch him die in my arms. Have to watch the Sin manipulate him. Have to watch Pheter kill Antoinette. Kill Dyys. Watch Alteo die. All of it. Always.”

Malis

Alfar scared the shit out of her. The elf really could see through time, wholly and completely. She just danced around the kitchen, vanishing and reappearing from location to location. Malis could swear sometimes she appeared before she disappeared.

However, the hellhound she adored. Garmr let her pat him. He just sat there, a paw in her lap, letting her rub the mane of fur flowing out from around his face. It felt a little strange, patting metal flakes, but she liked it for some reason. Liked that the creature rubbed into her, and didn't go running away at her scent.

Alfar crouched in front of her suddenly, with a small plate of biscuits. They were small, about the size of a large coin, and extremely thin. The elf put the plate in one of her hands, and grinned at her, "They're kinda sugary. Garmr likes them too. You should share."

The elf spun around, almost like a dancer, and half-ran off into her kitchen again. Malis frowned, glaring. She could swear she saw Alfar at the door of the oven just before she entered the kitchen. The elf was cheating, moving through time.

Malis picked up one of the biscuits and Garmr's head went straight up, ears standing on end. Malis smiled at him and bit a chunk off the round biscuit. It was hard, but it melted in her mouth. Alfar wasn't wrong, it was sugary. It was also kinda nice. The hellhound whined and she held out the rest of the biscuit to him. His jaws locked gently around it, and she giggled as she felt the tongue snag it from her hand, leaving her hand drenched.

She shook it off, grinning at the hellhound. She could feel Kao's approval. The goddess had pushed her to pet the hellhound. She'd fulfilled the desire. It felt good, and different. She felt lighter, brighter. She felt like she could see better, hear better. Like she'd suddenly come alive.

Alfar waved from the kitchen, "Izak, can you give Malis a rundown? She's done her first favour."

The assassin turned around in his seat. She could smell the mint tea he was drinking from where she was. He wasn't moving well, despite the healing. Like his chest felt like it was still ripped open. "You feel... Better, right? Like you are now more than you were?"

Malis nodded cautiously.

Izak pulled back his cloak, and indicated one of his tattoos, "This was my first. They're marks of approval. They also let you tap into the power of the one on the other end of your contract. Focus your mind on it, and it comes alive. Helps you come alive. Every time you do something the spirit likes, you get a reward. Some are small, some are bigger. The more they approve, you get more power."

Malis looked down at herself, "I'm marked?"

"Somewhere." Izak shrugged, "Usually somewhere obvious, for the first one."

She found it almost straight away, and wondered why she hadn't seen it before. On the back of her right hand was a black swirl. It looked almost like a storm, looping around itself in a way that her mind screamed was impossible, making her feel like she was going cross-eyed.

She held it up, "I got a mark."

Izak held up a hand quickly, "Don't show me, kid. Shamen wear cloaks for a reason. The more powerful kind, like myself, can take your power if we see your mark. If we understand what

it means. Lowering our hood is either a sign of surrender, or disrespect that we think you're too weak to do anything about it."

Milas put her hand behind her back quickly, "So what do I do?"

"Got any gloves?" Izak shrugged.

She didn't. She didn't have anything. Mikhael had taken care of her as well as he could. But she was free now. Free and dirt poor. If it wasn't for Mikhael's generosity, then she would probably be screwed. Akheron was cute, but he never fully thought through his actions. He was too impulsive. His personality matched his magic. Explosive, destructive. Beautiful to behold, but get too close and you get burned.

Garmr grabbed the biscuit from her hand. She might have deserved that, letting it hang there as she got lost in her thoughts. "Did you recognise the symbol?"

"Yes." Izak swallowed nervously, "It wasn't a normal mark, kid. It was multidimensional or some shit. Whoever your contract with is showing off. Showing that they own you here, and anywhere else you can go. That they will protect their property no matter what. It looks, to me, like a protection spell of some sort. A spell that can block all kinds of magical transport, as well as stopping physical attacks. But, to know for sure, you'll have to try it out."

Malis winced, looking down, "I don't want to do magic."

"You can't just ignore it!" Izak snapped, "You are endangering all of us. Every time you reject the contract, and reject who you are, you are becoming a risk to everyone else."

Malis glared at him, "I am not a mage or a shamen or any of that fucking shit. I'm... I... I'm a waitress. At a tavern. Nothing more."

The hunter shook his head, "No. You're just blind. You think having magic is a choice. You'll burnout, and kill us all."

She looked at her feet, patting the hellhound weakly. She hated that they kept saying things like that. That it wasn't her choice. She didn't want it. She was human, and that was all. She had been a slave. Some slaves might have been turned into weapons, but that wasn't her purpose. Her purpose was to please her master, always. Be that physically, or mentally. She was there to be a companion to Mikhael.

Alfar peeked out of the kitchen, "So, Malis? I can hear your thoughts. Can't turn it off. Sorry. I think Izak can read auras, which isn't quite the same, but lets him know your mood. Ali can definitely read your thoughts, too. I think Mabeline and Mikhael are the only ones who can't."

Malis went bright red. They could hear her thoughts as she'd struggled to think about Mikhael and Akheron. As she'd daydreamed about both of them, waiting for news from the front. From the fight.

Hells. Akheron and Astarte could hear her thoughts, too. They'd seen her apprehension and the thoughts she had about how dangerous they were. That they didn't belong in the city.

Izak grinned at her, "You hate magic so much, and I don't get it. But Akheron is all magic. Hells, his hair is magical store that mages actually trade for. He could get rich off his split ends. On the other hand, the other douchebag, Mikhael is part elf. So he's tied to magic too. He won't age like everyone else. He's older than you think he is, already."

Malis pulled her knees up, glaring, "Don't read my aura, dickwad."

The assassin grinned at her, "Aw. So cute. I have over two hundred marks on me, sweetie."

The Overlord really wants me to kill you. Promising big time magic if I do. Only reason I haven't gone through with it is your friends. I can't beat them all."

Malis felt her mouth twitch. Felt the anger rising up. It changed the way she saw the world. Blocked out things. Made her see her target. See his scent lingering in the air. She hated this. Being able to do this. It wasn't a choice. This is what happened when she got angry. Threatening to push her over the edge and go beserk.

She'd only gone fully beserk once. At the training house. They pushed her, on purpose. Pushed her over the edge by executing her only friend in front of her. A private execution. Just her, her friend, and the executioner. She'd avenged Graila's death. Torn him to pieces as he screamed for the mercy she didn't have.

It had felt right at the time. Now it just made her feel sick. Reminding her that she could never let herself lose control again. Not even in the service of her master. She had to be stronger than that.

The mage in the blue cloak, who seemed to be trying to play waitress, looked over at her, "Malis, I don't mean to pry, but aren't you free? No master at all?"

She held up the circle hanging from the chain around her neck, staring at it, "I... I don't think this is what kept me enslaved. Its hard."

The hellhound rubbed himself into her as she threatened to burst into tears. She grinned down at him and patted him gently, "I'm figuring it out. Slowly. At my own pace."

Malis looked up again. For a cafe that had only four tables when she'd entered, there were a lot of people spread out and trying to have nothing to do with each other. There were only four tables, she could count them. However, when she tried to count the people, there were more tables. It didn't make any sense at all.

Alfar appeared next to her, tossing Garmr a small and squishy ball. She patted Malis on the head, "Don't try too hard. It might hurt. My teashop is mine. Outside things. Like me. It overlaps and wraps around. What you call time is... Fragmented. Like me. I like it this way."

Malis looked at her with a small smile, "You're terrifying. The magic to warp time like this... That takes not just raw power, but incredible skill."

Alfar shrugged and handed her a warm chocolate cookie, "I watched myself do it. I knew what I was doing."

That in itself was not reassuring at all. It didn't make sense. Didn't Alfar see the paradox? That she only knew what she was doing because she already knew what she was doing?

So many mages over the generations had messed with time. All of them had died incredibly gruesome deaths or completely disappeared. Hell, the event at Calis had been caused by a Fae trapped outside of time.

"Tyr isn't like me." Alfar said, pouting, "He's a bag of dicks. A roasted bag of dicks. I'm here. I'm also there and where and that, but I'm here. Please. Don't treat me like an idiot. I don't like it."

Malis smiled slowly at her, "Damn. You're really cute, aren't you, Alfar?"

The elf blushed, and grinned at her, "I like you too, Malis. Thank you. For understanding."

Malis shrugged and patted the hellhound on the head, "I didn't ask to be a shaman. I guess you didn't ask to become an all-seeing half-sane prophet of no god."

Alfar laughed, “Akheron calls me cute and stupid. Cupid. I guess it fits, even if I don’t like wearing it.”

“You’re not stupid.” Malis replied, turning up her nose, “Forgetful, probably. Forgetful of the present moment. But I think I would be too, if I had to see everything, all at once.”

Alfar looked around, and then whispered, “Can you come to the kitchen?”

Charity

His fingers traces the layers of one of her horns, smiling at her with the expression she and every other woman in the 'verse knew how to recognise. She didn't know why it was so obvious, or why every man she'd ever slept with thought it wasn't plastered all over their face.

The face that said they'd got laid. Damn near impossible to hide. Like a stupid half-grin anytime they stopped to think about nothing, like their brain had been disabled and simply turned off, like a piece of machinery.

She smiled at him and kissed his nose, "Well, you're a snuggler. That's sort of unexpected for a slut."

Amayo feined hurt, and then squeezed her tighter, "Maybe I've just never had anyone worth staying with before. Never needed to wake up to see someone's smile before."

Charity laughed, "Or maybe you're an addict, and you finally found your perfect fix."

"You are intoxicating." He nodded slowly, and then touched his nose to hers briefly, "But there is a lot more here than a sex goddess. Isn't there?"

Charity giggled, "Sex goddess. Is someone trying to suck up?"

"No." Amayo replied, "Just trying to pretend that is something that can last. Envy is calling. Trying to gather us all for some important bullshit meeting. If it's about us... I don't know how much choice I'll have. Wrath'll kill me if he disapproves. Or get Sloth to bind me, and I can't break their spells."

Charity pouted, "So, like every other one nighter, you're going to run off and leave me alone in bed, right afterwards, when I do the awkward waddle."

Amayo grinned at her and kissed her cheek, "Hey. I'm not sure I have time for that before I go. It might be nothing. She's been testing Lord Akheron. He's passed the first hurdle, I expect. He likes power."

Charity winced, "Fuck. You really think he's the heir?"

"Never doubted it." Amayo replied, "He's one of the Hellbound Twins. The Hellbound Prophecy is the one that names the heir. I don't doubt he doesn't know that, but there has never been a question that he is the heir. Wrath is just being... Careful. He knows that his girl is destined to have her thread of fate tied to the heir."

Charity laughed, "Wait, Wrath has a girl? And he loses her to the heir?"

"Worse." Amayo laughed, "Envy is Wrath's girl. And Wrath has to share her. He doesn't lose her, not completely. She belongs to both of them. Apparently the heir has some mystic shit around him. Favoured by the Fates or something. Makes girls fall for him like flies."

Charity burst out laughing, "Just like Trei. Well. That'll be awkward. Every girl that tied herself to Trei ended up dead."

Amayo sighed, "I hope it doesn't. Envy is a friend. Wrath too, most of the time. We care for each other, each of us. The prophecy screws with us as much as it does with anyone else."

Charity shrugged, "Prophecies... They're like my magic, Amayo. They take off in directions you never thought of, never predicted. They're dangerous. Believe in them, and they'll scorch as sure as hellfire."

Amayo nodded, nestling his chin on her shoulder, "I know. But, when we woke up, a hundred

years back, or so... All of us shared a vision. We're tied to this, whether we want it, or not. Kru actually cursed us. That if we don't find and protect and guide the heir... Well, I'm not allowed to say. But it is bad."

Charity glared, "We should stop talking about this. We're not going to see eye-to-eye on it, and I still want to be able to kiss you without getting the urge to place my knee deep inside your groin."

"You want to do that anyway, don't you?"

Charity laughed and kissed him briefly, "Absolutely. But I won't. For now."

He kissed her back, deeply, "I will be coming back. For you. For this. Even for whatever you're trying to think up about me, and this city that I'm pretty sure you summoned to try and impress a boy."

"I wanted to give him a life." She sighed, "I've fucked his up, pretty bad. He kept me company, locked up inside a tiny metal flask. It was what Hope had on hand, to curse me with, at the time. I didn't mind it... But he was human. Only seeing oblivion between the Void, and that tiny room, would suck."

Amayo grinned, "Sorry. Just being jealous. That's a new feeling for me. Possessive. I think I understand Wrath a little better, considering he think he owns everything, especially us."

Charity grinned, rolling over onto her side, exposing herself, "That so? You sure you're not just an addict?"

He swallowed nervously, "You're trying to make me stay."

She slid the sheet down to her hip, "What gave you that impression?"

He kissed her, and she felt herself scream internally with frustration as he pulled himself away. He was capable of resisting her. It was what she'd wanted. It wasn't what she wanted right now.

He kissed her neck briefly, and then stood up, stretching, "Fuck. I'm late. Wrath is going to be pissed. I'll be back, Charity. As soon as I can. I'm not leaving you. Not ever. If I don't come back by sundown, then Wrath's probably killed me. Then you can avenge my ass. Please don't do anything stupid before then."

Charity put her hands behind her head. Showing off, though what she really wanted to do was glare at him. Trying to tempt him as best she could. She knew it wouldn't work, but it was worth a shot.

He was every bit as intoxicating as she was. She craved the feel of his touch. To hear his voice. She wasn't about to tell him that. She really didn't need one of her sworn enemies knowing that she would consider changing side if he asked.

Amayo burst out laughing, "I can't block out your thoughts, Charity. Remember?"

"Oh, fuck."

He stepped over her, and leaned down, kissing her forehead, "You're sweet. But, I'm not going to ever ask you to abandon who you are. You're a Nine. I'm a Sin. We can leave it at that. And yes, the others will be pissed I said that."

Charity grabbed his neck, yanking him off his feet. She felt him fall into her, onto her skin, and she bit his neck gently, "Now that. That was sexy, Amayo."

He groaned, but he didn't try to sit up. He didn't lean into her either. He was fighting a losing

power against his own will. She hooked her legs around his waist, holding him, and kissed him. His tongue entered her mouth, and she danced with him, enjoying him.

She felt his will giving way, crumbling like a house of cards. She dropped her legs down, and then kicked off his hips, knocking him backwards. His wings fluttered and he landed on his feet. Charity grinned at him, "That is to come back. Off you go, little Fae."

Amayo groaned, twitching, "Damn. I was coming back anyway."

"I'll have lunch for us." Charity smiled sweetly, sitting up as a pink silk began draping over her shoulders, "Go on. Get going."

The Fae shook his head, but walked through a shimmer in the air. His magic was impressive. Not as powerful as hers, but close. It surprised her. She'd thought a Sin would be stronger. Maybe he was suppressing it. Or it was suppressed by being next to her. Hard to make a judgement call.

Charity punched a wall in frustration. She was wondering if she had what it would take to murder her boyfriend. Whatever the situation was, it was beyond insane. There was no world in which killing the person you cared about was an acceptable thing.

The snow was starting to settle. The wind, too. Davosi was beginning to look more like an island again. A glorious paradise, apparently completely bereft of food. There wasn't much alive on this flyspit island so far from the world.

The villagers were getting by on small crabs, but the tiny white things tasted of the Fel. The corruption left by the Calamity was strong here. No mages going around cleaning it up.

She could try, and it would help things actually grow. They might be able to have a food source. But if she did try, it would go sideways, and she didn't want to think about a spell as powerful as a matrix cleaner going sideways.

There were two real options here. Get someone with their own control of magic to help out. There were a few mages and witches in Mania. None in Order. Or she could ask Amayo for a favour. He'd seemed open to it.

The second option was establishing a trade route. However, that would take time, and require they actually find something of worth on this godsforsaken island. Which was laughable.

The Fel destroyed everything.

She'd made these people. She had to deal with the consequences. She had to find a way to support them, to get them to lead themselves. She'd made them without purpose, without fully thinking through that she'd actually created people. People with emotions and thoughts and lives.

And she had entirely failed to provide the basic things they needed to survive, let alone a purpose to strive for, a reason to be alive.

She was the worst.

Temperance

It was tedious work. Something she excelled at, but did not enjoy. She was patient. Going through the motions. She was effective, and efficient, slowly moving through the magic and the shield and armour. She separated blood from bone, dissecting things that were alive before she interfered with them.

Her hair was matted, and she couldn't imagine how much it was going to suck finding a decent shower around here to help cleanse her fully. After jaunts like this, in the past, she used to seek out the fastest and heaviest waterfall and sitting and herself for hours.

It wasn't just the hair. Having scaled skin sucked for catching pieces of flesh and skin. If you left it sit, or missed a piece, then there was a chance of becoming infected, blistering and puss.

She paused to pick a tooth out from between her fangs. A barbed arrow bounced off her skull with a hard enough thud to leave a bruise. She dispatched the archer before they had a chance to draw.

There were a surprising number of hunters willing to die for this cause. Despite having dropped their dear leader through the roof as a forewarning. She could have ended them all at once. It would have been easier, but she was preserving her magic.

Finding people who don't want to be found takes a serious amount of magic. Mercy hadn't been asleep like everyone else. Which meant she'd lied to Hope, or been woken up early or something. There was a strong chance she had gone to ground.

Between the two of them, Mercy was the more powerful mage. She might not have her own source of magic, being human. She had to rely on crystals of stored energy, or power gifted to her by the others. Yet, with even that tiny speck of magic, Mercy could blow away entire armies.

A Zanfirian storm stone could turn a single mage into a weapon that could fight ten professional soldiers. One of those same stones in Mercy's hand had been used to destroy a hundred ships, all at once. Temperance had witnessed that atrocity first hand.

Mercy was kind, to the point of indolence. Yet, there came a point when people refused to see reason, refused to do anything but attack, and the most merciful thing you could do was grant them a quick end.

Temperance had watched as Hope held the mage that night, as Mercy cried herself to sleep, blubbering about the people she'd killed. Hope had needed to shield the woman, lashing out magically in her night terrors. Mercy was traumatised, every single time she took a life. She never got used to it.

She tore a skull in half with a messy explosion of brain matter, fluid and blood. Violence came easily to her. Wyrms killed. It was in their nature. She never regretted it, not like Nidoghr had grown to. She regretted the large scale things. The way cultures fell apart or nations crumbled. Regretted the famines, the disease. She didn't care much for the individual people.

She already couldn't remember the face of the archer she'd killed, or the dozen people since. She tore open the knight in front of her, stripping through the steel without effort, gutting him from throat to groin in a single blow. The knight died as she realised they were female. Hard to tell beneath armour, which was one reason so many preferred it.

Humanity had made her want to shave, just so they would stop assuming that a mane meant that she was a man. It wasn't a beard. It grew down her back as well as around her throat and

face. It was part of what it meant to be a wyrm.

Dating was hard, amongst her kind. It didn't normally happen. A stronger wyrm would dominate a younger, and force her to bear his young. Now and then a female might dominate a male, but it was rarer. Either way, it was never consensual.

She'd dated Nidoghr. Because the two of them were oddities, on the outside of their culture. At the time she'd been naive, thought that together they could create a new society, a new kind of wyrm that didn't have to fight just to talk to another.

He'd ended up hurting her. Because he was more of a wyrm than he realised, and so was she. She'd hurt him plenty. Not just because she'd won the fight, standing over his corpse, one foot on his throat, ready to kill him, when she'd realised she still had feelings for him.

She still did, even now. She didn't hate him. It was worse than that. She still loved him, heart and soul. She couldn't however, ever trust him again. He had betrayed her, and not in a way that they could ever come back from.

She smiled, despite herself. She was moping over her failed romance from hundreds of years ago whilst she carved expert warriors up until little chunks and left them for the carrion to deal with. Not the ideal state of mind for this sort of situation. It was absurd.

Yet, absurd had always been her life. From the moment she'd met Hope, and found out that she was different. That she wasn't just a frostwyrms. That most of her own clan were little more than candles beside her roaring bonfire of fire. And that was before Hope unlocked the door inside her head, and turned her into one of the Nine.

She wasn't completely a wyrm. Alfar had turned up at her birth, saved her life. Yet, that was because there was no one else that could ever help. Because she hadn't been born on the mortal plane.

She'd been born in the palace of the gods. Born, whilst gods and goddesses and celestials had watched on in fear as she was born dead. Her father had been a wyrm, a powerful leader of the frostwyrms clan. So powerful he had attracted attention.

Her mother had been a goddess. That was why she'd always been different. That was what Hope had told her, those many years ago when she'd first met her. Temperance's mother was Gaia. The goddess of the mortal plane. Of the life that flows through every mortal.

Temperance stood alone, breathing hard, in the ruins of a building. No wall higher than her knee remained, and there was nothing else breathing in the space, not even a rat. She'd killed them, all of them.

She hated herself that was able to do this. Able to do it so thoughtlessly, without considering the ramifications or effects. These people had lives. Families, loves. Some would have children. Most would have people who wanted vengeance.

Vengeance that was simply impossible. Angry hearts would have no closure, no peace, when it came to things she had hurt. This is what Nidoghr was afraid of. His precious mortals dying by her hand. Dying, not because they'd invited death, but because they couldn't escape her.

He crashed in front of her.

Temperance's eyes blazed to life, the white flecks shifting and swarming in an endless blue sea of rage. "I told you I would fucking kill you!"

He shrugged impassively, "And if I've come to say nothing, and do nothing? Come just to see

your handiwork?"

"I don't need you and your godsdamned reminders of what I am!" Temperance shouted, the earth beneath her feet cracking, and beginning to shake.

He held up his claws, his black scaled skin reflecting in the midday sun, "I haven't come to fight you, Tempi. I haven't come to judge. I haven't come to hurt you. The gods know that you do enough of that to yourself."

She shouted at the sky in exasperation, as the tremors became something more. She could hear windows breaking, and panicked people running. She knew she was causing it, but she couldn't fix it. Couldn't get the anger under control.

Nidoghr stepped towards her, and she pulled away, "Don't you fucking dare!"

He winced, flecks of ice appearing on his mane, and stepped towards her again, placing his warm and gently hands on her arms. She could smell the sulphur on his breath, reminding her of happier times.

Temperance shook with rage. None of this was fair. Kao dumping the responsibility to lead the Nine on her. To stop the Sins. To stop the ascension of the heir, and save the future of all the races. Making her kill. Again and again. Pointless death by the hands of a woman who had no idea what she was doing.

She never had any idea what she was doing.

He smiled at her, leaning in, slowly. She saw his fangs, feeling the growl rising up slowly in his chest. A rumble to match her own. She was tempted to meet him. Just as much as she was tempted to rip that arrogant head off those gorgeous shoulders. Nidoghr's forehead hit her like a mountain falling.

Darkness closed in.

Astarte

Distracting the Vizier was not something she was willing to leave up to her idiot brother. He'd probably just threaten to blow something up. Or get angry and have things blow up anywhere.

She stepped through the walls of reality and into the throne room. Such a pompous place for nothing. A tiny flyspit town at the border. This wasn't exactly Ozandia. It wasn't the emerald-lined streets of Jian. Adairoft couldn't even compare to Kabad. The Vizier was an arrogant man with delusions of grandeur.

The man looked up from his throne, "I guess sealing the fortress doesn't do much to discourage the likes of you."

Astarte rolled her eyes, "We've prevented the invasion, for now. The goblins are camped outside the city, around about five thousand of them."

The Vizier glared, "That number makes no sense, adventurer. The Wildlands can only support a thousand of those infernal creatures. Perhaps, as a newcomer, you shouldn't exaggerate about things you don't understand."

"They're not infernal." Astarte laughed, and her hair began to glow, lifting slowly into the air, "I, however, am. I'm a Fury. You might not want to believe. Not want to understand the fear of facing something you could never fight, not even with an army."

She stepped forward, her hair hissing and coiling. She leaned towards the wide-eyed man who flinched, unable to pull away as the snakes began to nip at his face. "I witnessed the Godless Night, did you know? I was in Solas. Helped fight off the Zanfrian invasion. I didn't care much for killing your kind then. Still don't. I don't hate humans... But you're really not worth my time."

"Astarte."

She pulled back, suppressing herself, "I've got this one, Akr."

Her brother shrugged, "I was just looking to get away from Alfar, really. You were right. I like her."

Astarte grinned, clapping despite herself. Then she frowned and turned back to the business at hand, "So, Vizier. Your intention is to wall yourself away. To let the city live or die depending on what people like us decide to do."

The man rolled his eyes.

Akheron nodded, "Accepted. If the city lives and dies by our whim, then the city is ours. You can sleep and hide in your castle. The city is now, ours."

The Vizier stood angrily, and Astarte turned, smiling as she saw the hellhound rip into existence. Her smile grew broader as it vomited blood and bone onto the ground. The elf perched atop the head glared, "Garmr ate him. He got sick. I will poison your adviser, Tane, because he will annoy me. Don't annoy me."

Then the two were gone again. Her brother leaned on her shoulder, "Did Alfar just have her dog vomit the body of a hunter?"

Astarte smiled and elbowed him in the gut, "Maybe she won't be so reviled by the mad Fury who blows everything up. Well, Vizier Tane. I think you have our answer. Keep the fortress closed. Or we'll come for you."

He glared at her, "This is a coup. The capital will never accept this."

Akheron laughed, “Probably right about that. Adairoft is right on the border. They’ll be sending someone to make our relationship with them official. To keep the peace. I expect they’ll require your execution.”

So her brother wasn’t completely clueless about politics. The capital couldn’t risk fighting their own, not with the two empires nipping at each other’s heels. The weakness of a city this close to the border that might align with their enemy was too much of a risk.

The only options were negotiated peace, like Akheron was suggesting, or another more likely solution. One he was either smart enough not to talk about, or too dumb to realise would be the empire’s choice.

Adairoft would be razed to the ground.

The Vizier looked at the twins, and then to the gruesome pile lying on his floor. “Someone, clean that shit up. I guess we’re at an impasse. I will wait to see what humanity decides, Furies.”

Astarte rolled her eyes, and then grinned at her brother, “Looks like you didn’t get to hide from Alfar.”

Akheron glared at her, “I don’t think hiding from Alfar is actually something people can do. But... I don’t know what to think, Astarte. I like her, and this is the first time. I don’t like the way it makes me feel.”

“Vulnerable.” Astarte grinned, “Like you want her to tell you what to do. It comes with the territory, Akr. Our muk’to made a promise to our muk’do. That’s the kind of promise love makes you want to make.”

Akheron laughed, “I always thought I was more human than that. People owning each other... That has never seem right to me.”

Astarte shrugged, “Slavery is shit, Akr. There’s a reason we wiped it out in Solas.”

She glared at the Vizier, “Where to? The farm?”

“Sure.”

The two vanished and then reappeared. It didn’t look like any of the goblins had even attacked the house. Unsurprising, considering Akr was at the centre of all of this.

“Love is different to slavery?”

Astarte looked over at her brother with a small smile, “Not really. A slave always looks out for their master first. Not a single thought to their own safety. That is precisely how love messes with you. It makes you think the other one is worth more. Because to you, they are. Life is dull and bland without them.”

Akheron shook his head, smiling, “And when you break up with them?”

“Love doesn’t always last.” Astarte said sheepishly, “Sometimes it is just the thrill. It always hurts, when it ends. Even if it was never going to last. Every love is different. Always feels different.”

Her brother sighed, “That’s something I didn’t understand. Why someone would walk into that, knowing how much it was going to hurt.”

“Didn’t?” Astarte said, leaning up against one of the walls.

He shrugged, and look up at the hole in roof, “I... Am tempted. I sort of do want Alfar to own me. Partly because it already feels intoxicating being anywhere near her. Partly because I think it’ll feel even better. However, right now, everything is far too complicated.”

Astarte glared, "Crap. You like the other elf, too."

"No." Akheron shook his head, "She's sexy. She makes me think about screwing her, sure. But that's not what Alfar makes me feel. Sex is temporary. You've taught me that enough times."

Astarte glared and tossed a fireball at him, "Don't call your sister a slut!"

Akheron laughed, catching it, "You also taught me that whoever you sleep with doesn't always let go. And that unnameable elf seems the sort to stick their claws in."

Astarte shook her head, grinning, "Yeah, I owe you that one. My boyfriends have been kinda shit at times."

"The paladin was a one night, wasn't it?" Akheron grinned at her.

Astarte's eyes widened, "Eh, no. No it was not. I mean... It was supposed to be. But he was crazy sexy. Drove me nuts. Every time I wanted to break up... He'd say something or just touch me, and it wouldn't take a moment."

Akheron turned up his nose, "I was not asking for details."

She laughed, "Well, I am. You and Alfar. Everything."

"She kissed my cheek." He said, "I think... That's what got through to me. She's mentioned other stuff. Something about a tree is really important to her."

"Duh." Astarte rolled her eyes, "That has to be your first kiss. Its a romantic location, and no girl ever forgets the first."

"You have, haven't you?"

She tossed another fireball, "Being stupid and drunk doesn't count! That's not a real first kiss. When you choose to let the other person know how you feel, and words just aren't enough anymore."

"True words."

Both turned, looking at the elf standing in front of the closed door.

Mikhael

He wished he knew what Alfar and Malis were up to in the kitchen. He had a disturbing feeling that the elf was up to something, and a more disturbing thought that Akheron would hold him responsible for whatever it was.

The other two were lounging.

Mabeline sitting, taking her time sipping her tea, barely hiding that it was an experience she found otherworldly. If he tried to talk to her, she probably pin him to the table with a dagger through the hand, and then go back to sipping the tea slowly.

Ali, however, seemed somewhere between bored and scared. Something he could appreciate. An army on their doorstep, their lives in the hands of two strangers who weren't even human, and nothing to do about it.

He sat down at her table, "Play cards?"

She turned an icy gaze towards him, "Ah. The tavern owner. Part elf."

Mikhael sighed, "Yeah. Like I have control over any of this."

Ali rolled her eyes, but smiled, "Fair enough. If you're looking to pass the time to find out how fucked we all are, why not just ask Alfar?"

"Because she might drop me off the edge of the world." He replied flatly, "We haven't got along, over the past few years. She's the town eccentric. She's killed more than her fair share of my customers."

"They deserved it." Ali replied with a laugh, "Though, I do have to wonder. Alfar and Garmr left a while ago. Do you think she's dealing with the army?"

"I have learned not to try and predict the elf." Mikhael laughed, "I thought I'd got her figured out once, a while back. Right up until I found my entire bed covered in honey."

Ali laughed, and shook her head, "Yeah, Alfar's different. I tried to kill her. So she's forcing me to hang out here until she makes the Guild pay. She didn't care that I tried. More interested in the people who put the order in."

Mikhael glanced at her wrist, "Understanding of her. Though she has a decent enough reason."

Ali held up the silver bangle, "Yeah, I'm a slave. That doesn't mean you have to be a jerk and point it out."

"I was just thinking how much the twins hate slavery."

Ali nodded towards the kitchen, "Akheron do that?"

"I should have. A long time ago." Mikhael sighed, "I thought I was taking care of her. But yeah, he got angry. Broke the bracelet."

"And the death spell on it." Ali laughed, "I'm a mage. You think I wouldn't take it off if I could? That kid must be impressive. The spells are custom made for the slave. I've spent the last twenty years trying to decipher mine. I think I'm about halfway. And Akheron just destroyed it? How?"

Mikhael shrugged, "He didn't use the spell I was taught for the bracelet. He just sort of... Glared. And it fell apart."

Ali shivered, “And he’s the less knowledgeable one, right? Astarte is meant to be the brains of those two.”

“He has power, though.” Mikhael laughed, thumbing behind himself towards the wall, “Did you see the size of the last explosion?”

The mage nodded, “Yeah, but, I’ve met the guy. You might not know it, Mikhael. I don’t know how much magic you know. But when that guy walks into a room, all the magic goes to him. Mana, what we channel. It is like he owns it. When the two of them walked in before... Shit, I couldn’t have bent a spoon with the magic that was leftover.”

He shrugged, “I’m a hexex, Ali. Burned out when I was just a kid. There’s no magic left in this old body of mine. Well, just a little.”

The mage leaned forward, putting her head in her hands as she grinned at him, “Just how old is that, Mikhael? Mike’s has been here a while. Not as long as Alfar’s, but a very long time.”

He sighed, “Well, usually the guy goes first, but this time around... Can I be rude? How old is the mage?”

Ali rolled her eyes, leaning back, “I’m the one prying. Guess you are at least part elf, to care. Fair play is fair play. I’m turning twenty seven. Now... How about you?”

Mikhael winced, “Hells. You’re not some old immortal mage. Well... I’m young by elfin standards, and old by human. I’m eighty six.”

Ali burst out laughing in surprise, “Seriously? Eighty? How does someone who used to be an adventurer get to be that old?”

“By killing everything else, and not getting hurt.” He replied and sighed, touching his shoulder, “Gave it up. I got slower, but nothing else seemed to. The tavern seemed like a good alternative.”

Ali smiled at him, “A good way to still get a taste of that danger? Customers of that kind aren’t boring.”

Mikhael shrugged, “Something like that. So. Have I totally freaked you out?”

“Sort of.” Ali laughed at him, “I don’t think I’m ever going to live to be as old as you are. How do relationships work between people like that?”

“They don’t.” Mikhael sighed heavily, “My grandmother is still alive. Somewhere out there, pretending like Eldrasa wasn’t burned to the ground generations ago. Still mourning my grandfather’s death. Still mourning my father’s. I have every reason to believe she will mourn mine when I finally die. She regrets falling for my grandfather. She’s told me a number of times.”

Ali frowned, “Dude. You know I’m hitting on you, poorly.”

“Yes.” Mikhael smiled tightly, “But it doesn’t work out in the end. You think having regrets is bad? Try having them for so long everyone else involved in them is dead.”

“I’m a slave.” The mage laughed, “I wasn’t looking for anything long term. Can’t, really. Not unless the boy wonder does another miracle and breaks my bracelet.”

He sighed heavily, “You’re not going to let it go, are you?”

“No.” Ali grinned at him.

Akheron

He wasn't happy to see the elf. To see the woman destroying an entire town in some misguided attempt to remind him that he liked power. Everyone liked the power to change their own life. It meant they weren't be shit on for once. Weren't being used.

Rsja walked up to him slowly a delicate finger tracing his chest, and she smiled, "Have I given you enough space yet, my king?"

Astarte sighed behind him with irritation, "Please, do not yank my brother's pants down in front of me."

Rsja laughed, "If that'll get you to leave."

Akheron grabbed her wrists as elfin fingers hooked around the edge of his pants, "Don't."

The elf pouted and glared at him, "As you wish. But do you always have to hang out with your sister? It makes things less fun."

"We're twins." Akheron replied, "So. I guess you're here to test me. Right?"

The elf shook her head, "No, that can wait. I was going to, true. But I'm jealous. I can smell someone else on you. Someone who likes you. That's not fair. I'm one of the Sins. You belong to us. Who is she?"

Akheron blinked, "She?"

"The elf!" Rsja yelled, stamping a foot, "Who is she? And where is she? I couldn't find her in the city. That's not playing fair. You're ours, Akheron."

Astarte cautioned him, "She won't like it."

That was true. What was also true, was that they had just found their first foothold against the Sins. Whilst there was not yet a way to fight them, there was something to exploit here.

He was groping in the dark. He hadn't been in a relationship before. So turning around and trying to manipulate someone who was clearly more than just sexually attracted to him was extremely difficult. Especially when they were already trying to manipulate you.

"What do you mean, 'ours'?"

Rsja smiled up at him, "Oh, yummy. Yes, Akheron. I like you. This isn't a game. Well, it definitely is a game. Watching you trying to remain so calm when it is obvious to a blind man that you've never had a woman. That's fun. But, I, and all the Sins, have a relationship with you. We belong to you."

Astarte burst out laughing. The elf glared at her, as his sister wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes as she just couldn't stop laughing.

Akheron sighed with irritation. "She's right. Calling me out for being a virgin, not that sexy. Also, well... If I had a relationship with you, I'd want to belong to you, not the other way around. I'm a Fury."

"And with Furies, the stronger belongs to the weaker." Rsja grinned at him, "You might become stronger than me, one day. But right now, you're just cute. I'm not completely an idiot. I learned about your culture. A bit. It is hard to find out about a race of people who kill anyone who gets close. Especially when them being unable to kill you just makes them very... Mad."

Astarte sank to the floor, laughing even harder.

Akheron looked down at the elf, "I am... Never... Going to belong to you. The opposite, we'll see."

Rsja's diamond insets flashed as she grinned up at him, "Naughty. I'll accept it. You're wrong. But I'll let it go. Now... Will you kiss me?"

His breath caught at the suggestion. It was tempting. Not just because it would establish a foothold with the elf. Her scent was intoxicating. Like fresh cherry blossoms. It made him want to forget everything. To melt into her embrace. It was playing merry havoc with his hormones.

Rjsa stood up on her tippy toes, and she brushed her lips gently against his cheek. It wasn't a kiss, not like with Alfar. It was something less, with the promise of something more.

His thoughts grew fuzzy, indistinct. It wasn't just a scent. The smell that drifted off the woman. It was messing with him. He should know the word, but there were no words.

They were floating away.

He heard a snap and blinked, breathing heavily. Astarte stalked up next to him, "That is a powerful pheromone. Sex magic, advanced. That design hasn't been seen in three hundred years. I'm surprised it works on a Fury. You haven't even tweaked it. I guess that's just the raw power of your magic."

Rsja glared at his sister, as if considering murdering her in front of him. He bared his fangs, growling softly. The elf glanced back at him, and pouted. "Fine. She is irritating. How did you break him out from the spell? You didn't break the spell itself. That is an exceedingly annoying gift."

Astarte smiled, "Oh, it is fairly simple. The same principle comes into effect when a hexex blows themselves up. They try and deny themselves, and magic just gets clogged, until it explodes in the face of the one holding it."

Rsja rolled her jaw, glaring angrily, "You made me break the spell. By reducing its effectiveness. That... Is gross. You didn't show me what you can do. You didn't on the wall either."

"I'm not as dumb as my brother." Astarte grinned.

The elf tried to slap his sister. He caught her wrist easily, and sighed heavily, "Let me try, just try, and explain to you how much you do not want to hurt my sister. We're not actually twins. We were, triplets. One of us died. We all felt it. Their last moment, was the first thing I ever felt. I felt her death wash over me."

Rsja stared at him, and for the first time, he saw her afraid. Saw real fear in her eyes. He glared at her as he lowered her arm, "If you ever attack my sister again, you will never have your king. Because I will die trying to kill you and every single one of the Sins."

The elf sighed heavily, glaring at Astarte, "Fine. If that is your wish, my king."

Rsja looked down, as if she was disappointed in something. "You won't kiss me now, will you? Never trust me enough."

"Trust is earned." Akheron sighed, "Right now, you're forcing me to put the people I care about in danger. There isn't a whole lot to trust, is there?"

"Rsja." She said, looking at him pleadingly, "If you ask... With my name... I'll give you whatever you're asking for. Just this once."

"Leave Adairoft out of this." Akheron instructed.

The elf's ears pulled back, and she looked at him angrily. He just smiled, putting his arms around her shoulders, like he'd seen Astarte do when she wanted someone who was pissed at her to melt and smile at her. "Rsja."

The elf sighed heavily, "Well. You suck at seduction. Really bad at making a girl feel it. But, you said my name. As promised. Fine. The army is disbanding."

Akheron smiled and kissed her forehead.

Rsja stiffened in his arms, and he felt a surge of amusement from both himself and sister at the complete confusion and terror on the elf's face. She had not at all imagined he would do that.

Akheron dropped his arms stepping back, "Thank you. Now. I guess you still have some quest for me to prove my worth?"

Rsja's ears went pink, "Just... Give me a minute, here."

Astarte laughed and elbowed him in the gut, "Taking away a girl's breath on the first kiss. Not bad. I mean, that was a terrible, shitty idea. But not bad."

Rsja let out a deep sigh, and smiled up at him, "So. The next test the sins wanted from you, was to -"

The elf was cut off as she went flying sideways with a crash.

Akheron's eyes widened, and he winced. "Oh."

"Like I said, shitty idea." Astarte said with a grin, and waved at the seething elf now standing in front of them, "Hey, Alfar."

Alfar

He was an idiot. She knew he was going to go and do it and he did it anyway! He kissed the elf who was trying to end the world as they knew it. Kissed the Sin who had just threatened to destroy a city just to make a point.

She knew things could have gone better if the Sin didn't know she existed, but every time she let her heart dictate over her head and turned up in a jealous rage. Even though she knew Akheron didn't feel for her.

Akheron sighed, "Alfar. Am I... Your boyfriend in the future? You've sort of danced around on that one."

The other elf hissed, flipping onto her feet, "Boyfriend!? He's my king! You will not have him, elf!"

Alfar turned back, "Rsja. Envious. You always want what you can never have, don't you? Ever since you were a little girl. Too little to realise you will never have the magic you crave. Serving Akheron won't be enough. The others will always look down on you. The weakest."

Rsja stood up, straightening, and staring at her in surprise, "You're not just saying things. No one can read my aura. No one. What are you, elf?"

"I wasn't reading your aura." Alfar smiled sweetly, "Though, if you do need to know it, today it's pink. Because Akr kissed your head. Something I will never forgive him for."

Astarte laughed, "Told you."

"You already said that." Akheron snapped back.

"Future boyfriend." Rsja said slowly, "Are you a time mage, elf? I hate arrogant creatures like you. Time is difficult enough for gods to traverse. Let alone a creature as weak and pathetic as you. Your magic is insignificant."

Alfar ground her teeth together. She really hated Rsja. Always had, always would. And not just because she would kiss Akheron. The immensity of that elf's arrogance was greater than even Sarin's, when she would resurrect Tyr.

She spread herself around the room. Surrounding the elf in her stupidity. So many of herself. Alfar realised she really did look cute when she was angry, Akheron was right. Her hair was messy, which probably didn't help with the intimidation. There was a tea leaf stuck in it too.

Rsja's face went pale, and looked around at the circle of elfin around her, and she swallowed nervously, "You did not have enough magic to do this. It isn't effecting your magic. How are you doing this!? You should be burning out!"

One of her smiled, leaning forward, "Boo."

The elf hissed at her, ears folding back against her head, "I am still a Sin."

"Would you two not fight over me?" Akheron sighed.

One of the Alfar's slapped him. Gently, but enough to remind him that she was her own person. If she felt like fighting over him, she would. Especially as this wasn't entirely about him. It was also about making Rsja realise that power didn't mean everything.

"You're right, elf." Alfar glared, "I don't have the magic to do this. Not really. The problem is, you assume it takes power and magic to move through time. What do I always say, Assie?"

Astarte grinned, “Alfar here, is everywhere. And everywhere is godsdamned fucking everywhere, Rsja.”

The Sin paused, and looked around her, “Wait. You’re not subject to time?”

Alfar smiled innocently and shrugged, “Not really. Little bit. Little different. More like time doesn’t like me. She’s mean. She also doesn’t exist. Probably why she’s so mean to me. Doesn’t like me assuming the gender for a concept that isn’t even real.”

Rsja laughed softly, “A fixed point in time, coalescing in an actual person. I don’t that has ever happened before.”

“It won’t.” Alfar said sadly, “Just me. Lucky me. So weird that Ausosa will track me down just to curse me.”

The elf rolled her eyes, “Who cares about Ausosa? She’s yesterdays news. Completely wiped out by the budding goddess of war.”

“Aur nearly didn’t.” Alfar said, glaring, “She will fight really hard. You don’t get to dismiss that.”

“Fair.” The Sin nodded, “But that means your magic is limited at scale, by how many of you there are in a place, but not limited. You could use all the magic you have, always, and nothing would happen unless you wanted it to. Do you even age, elf?”

Alfar sighed, and fished a biscuit out of her dress, the others of her going back to where and when they’d come from. “You’re boring.”

She nibbled on the biscuit, turning to face Akheron. “You shouldn’t kiss her. It isn’t nice.”

He nodded slowly, “You realise Rsja’s trying to punch you, right?”

Alfar shrugged. Every time a fist got close to where she was, she wasn’t there and never had been. She sighed, looking at her biscuit. She’d saved it for Garmr, like most of the food hidden in the folds of her clothes. Most of it was there because she didn’t really like it.

“I want a sugar cookie.” Alfar pouted, and then glared at him, “I warn and warned and will warn you, Akr, always. The Sin is dangerous. Playing with her heart is stupid. Not even cute. Not cupid. Just suicidal. She has a boyfriend. He minds too.”

Akheron glared at the elf desperately trying to land a blow, even using time magic to try and rewrite some of her attacks. Rsja tired herself out soon. Next. Alfar didn’t mind it. Not this. “A boyfriend, Envy?”

The elf pouted, “You didn’t use my name.”

“You’re coming on to me when you have a boyfriend.” Akheron replied, “We’ve talked about trust. This is an important part of it. I’m not going to help you cheat on him. Well, maybe to save the city. But still. It’s kinda insulting.”

Alfar turned, sucking on the hard biscuit, smiling at the elf trying and failing to punch her in the face. “Wow. Your time magic really does suck.”

Rsja paused, leaning on her knees, sweat pouring off her from all the mana burned. “Bitch. Yes, Akheron. I have a boyfriend. He’s a Sin. Which means that you are different. He knows I belong to you. Just like he does. If you choose to lay me down on a bed, there wouldn’t be a thing he could do about it.”

Alfar glared and flicked the elf in the face. “He’s not yours.”

“Not yours, either.” Rsja sneered.

Akheron sighed, “So, who is the boyfriend?”

“The Wrath.” Alfar said, smiling sweetly at him. Akheron didn’t like that response. He found it rather terrifying. She liked it. He needed to sweat a little. To remember what Alfar remembered. The danger of the Sins.

The Sin glared, “I see. You didn’t defend the city, didn’t help Akheron, because you were hiding. Not from me, obviously. From Wrath.”

“No.” Alfar turned, smiling, “Wrath is scary. But still not scary enough. Garmr wouldn’t like him. I didn’t want Lust to know me. I knew he would. He’s scary.”

Rsja swallowed nervously, “Lust has an interest in you?”

“Not yet. Next. Soon.” Alfar shivered, and the Sin turned to the twins, “Akheron. I smelled this elf on you. I know you care... Something for her. I don’t much like her. However, if you have any self interest, at all, get rid of her. If Lust wants her, run a continent away from her, and he might consider not destroying your life. Lust won’t touch you, Akheron, as our king. But he will touch the lives of everyone you have ever met, from your sister to the shopkeeper who sold you an apple once. You don’t want that.”

Alfar smiled weakly at Akheron, “I will tell you. The Sins are scary.”

Astarte sighed, “So, Lust is the jealous type, then?”

Alfar shook her head, “No, not really. Not the way you’re thinking. That’s not an angle to exploit. He owns all the angles. Lust and Gluttony have a thing. I and Garmr have a thing. Lust gets mad.”

Rsja raised her hand, “Which brings us full circle. The name of Gluttony, the Sin who is a hellhound, Akheron, is Cerbho. Summon him willingly, and you will be a third of the way to becoming king. Elsewise... You may wish to do the summoning a long way from Adairoft, if you still wish to protect it.”

Alfar flinched.

Akheron sighed, “Oh, kregstad. Alfar... Is your dog going to interfere?”

“Garmr knows him.” She whispered tentatively.

Rsja stuck her face in front of Alfar’s. “How can your dog know the first created Hellhound? Created by the Infernal Tribes before the harrowing of the Hells by the Golden One and his army of Fury? Is he like you?”

Alfar glared at the elf, “Rsja. Back off. I don’t like being touched. Don’t like remembering everything that those hands have done. Clear?”

The elf hissed at her.

Akheron put a hand on both of their shoulders. Alfar didn’t wait to listen to him. He was being sympathetic to a monster. Maybe she shouldn’t have teased Rsja so much. He thought she was no longer a threat.

Stupid Akheron.

She reappeared in her kitchen, under the sink, knees pulled up to her chin as she began to cry.

Malis

She spun as she heard the crying. She saw the elf there, and felt her entire world feel like it was falling. She couldn't stand to watch that face cry. It was an elfin face. Perfectly symmetrical, perfectly free of imperfection. No scars from pimples, no freckles. The only sign of anything like that were the biscuit crumbs.

Malis knelt in front of her quietly, wanting to put a hand on her knee. Wanting her to feel better, but having zero idea what their relationship was. She'd been surprised when Alfar pulled her into the kitchen. Surprised even more with what Alfar had done.

She didn't know if it was just a demonstration or something else.

Alfar smiled up at her through the tears, "Akr is a jerk. He likes the other elf."

Malis winced, swallowing, "Alfar."

She shrugged, "I knew he would. I always know. It isn't fair. He's just a big fat jerkface. I don't want to like him. Never will. I'm sorry. I'm a terrible girlfriend."

Malis heart fluttered, "So... That thing before."

Alfar groaned, "Oh hells. I got things out of order again, didn't I? I have baggage. I'm not a good person, Malis. I see everything. Not just the timeline. Every timeline. Ones where you're already dead. Ones where you were never born. Ones that have already ended. Ones where I'm dating other people. It is... Cruel of me. To ask you to be with me. And I even forgot to do that."

Malis reached out, taking her hand gently, "You want to be with me? Really? Aren't you insane about Akheron?"

"Bastard." Alfar said angrily, "Look, I knew Akheron before he was born. I knew it was his destiny to break my heart. I don't want it. I know, even now... We can't last. I know that none of my relationships ever last."

Malis smiled at her, "That sounds like a sad way to live. I guess you can't live in the moment, can you? Enjoy us... Just for a while?"

Alfar's eyes widened, "This is the only time you didn't walk out. Hurt."

Malis shuffled under the sink beside her, putting a head on her shoulder, "Well, I guess surprising me was the right thing to do, then. I've... Never had a girlfriend before. Never had a boyfriend."

She stopped, not wanting to continue down that particular train of thought. She'd never had anything. She liked Mikhael, she liked Akheron. She really liked Alfar. But only one of those had ever done anything about it, and she herself wasn't one of them.

Alfar put her head against her, "I remember the training, Malis. I wish I didn't, but I do. That's why I avoided the tavern. I didn't want to have to see you, to remember what was done to you. I wasn't sure I wanted... This."

Malis smiled sadly, a tear running down her cheek, "I thought you were avoiding Mikhael."

"Sort of." Alfar said, "Avoiding wanting to hurt him for the way he treated my girlfriend. Not even a blanket. Not like you could tell him how you should be treated. You didn't know."

Malis laughed softly, "In every timeline... You only get me once, right?"

"Two or three. But rare."

Malis smiled, "But in every timeline you get mad at Mikhael because you're my girlfriend?"

Alfar grinned, "Of course. Because to me, you always are."

Malis snuggled in deeper, and felt Alfar's arm go around her. It felt nice to be held like this. No expectations, no threats. She felt safe, protected. She knew Alfar wouldn't do anything to her that she didn't want. She'd even broken off the kiss when she felt Malis hesitate, before.

She spoke hesitantly, "I... Want you to kiss me. Again."

Alfar sighed, "Not yet. Please. I just want to hold you. Is that okay?"

Malis smiled, "Of course. I want you to always hold me. Even if you've told me it won't last. I... Think I'm going to pretend it will."

The ball of emotions in her head, that was Kao, was dancing like crazy. Squealing with excitement and bursting with light. Whatever she had done, to end up with Alfar, the goddess adored it.

Alfar whispered, her words slurring. The woman was tired. "Kao can be a bit unpredictable. But she likes cute. She even takes Yio to Eldrasa to get over a boy."

Malis frowned, "Can you read thoughts, Alfar? Or just timelines?"

"Mostly time." Alfar yawned, "Kao tells me about this moment, once. That it made her happy. I like being happy. You make me feel happy."

Malis blinked in surprise as she felt the elf's weight suddenly increase. She eased her onto her side, helping the elf drop onto her lap. She was asleep. She didn't know what to do about that.

She wanted to stroke her hair, but wasn't sure it was allowed. It might be too much, too soon. She didn't know how to have a relationship, especially not with someone like Alfar. Hells, the elf had admitted relationships were hard for her, too.

She felt the dare from Kao appear. Having a contract with Kao wasn't like she'd imagined. It wasn't a spirit pushing her towards being a hero or champion. Kao was already a powerful goddess, she didn't need to establish herself, to earn worshippers. Instead, Kao dared her to do things. It was like having an outrageously outgoing friend.

This time, the dare was to kiss the elf's cheek. Any kind of kiss. Just to lean in, and kiss the person that... This wasn't just attraction. She didn't know what it was, or how to describe it. It was something that meant something more the more she thought about it.

This had to be it. The thing the other girls had talked about at the training house, before it was beaten out of them. The the thing that the elder girls had chided the younger for believing in.

Love.

Something insane that made you do absolutely anything, even the things that made you hurt yourself. She was willing to accept that Alfar would hurt her, that it was a fact written in stone, in exchange for sharing something for just a moment.

The way the others had spoken about it, she'd assumed that love, if it existed, was this kind feeling that brought people together into some kind of harmony she couldn't imagine.

It wasn't like that. Love was cruel. Forcing you to do whatever it took just to see the other person smile. She'd never seen herself as having much value, but even now, she meant even less than she had. All that mattered was a woman she knew was going to betray this feeling, at some point.

And it didn't matter.

It should matter that Alfar was going to leave her one day. She knew it should. She knew it should feel it. Feel angry that Alfar even dared to suggest they be together if she wasn't going to take it seriously.

Yet, she knew the elf would. That Alfar was taking it seriously. She was just cursed with a perfect vision of the future. Every future. Alfar knew every opportunity, and how they would play out. Knew the mistakes she would make, and the situations where there was no right answer.

Malis felt a tear drip onto her cheek. She was scared. She didn't know what the future held. Alfar might know, but she wasn't sharing. Not... Clearly. She might not be able to, not without changing it. Making it worse.

But Malis knew that the Sins scared Alfar. That whatever future they represented, was absolutely terrifying. Whatever danger they posed, might not be one that ended. That the threat would extend long after Malis had died. And Alfar would still be there.

Crying in private, smiling in public.

This is what it would mean to be Alfar's girlfriend. Knowing what she faced. As peaceful as the world might become, Alfar would always know the horror of it ending. Know the day the gods died, and didn't come back again. The day that the last thread of reality twisted apart.

Alfar had already seen it. Saw it every day, every moment. Now and always. The end of everything. She'd seen everyone she ever cared about die, before she even met them. Seen the way they would hurt her.

Alfar had seen every mistake that Malis would make, and she was still interested in living through those memories. She took the bad, with the good.

Malis knew she wasn't that strong. She still cried herself to sleep most nights. All she'd faced was a lifetime of being tortured. She hadn't seen what Alfar had seen.

"Cupid." Alfar muttered in her sleep.

Charity

Teaching was one thing she excelled at. Both the mages of Mania were only too pleased to have her teach them the necessary spells to clean the matrix of the Fel. Neither of them were close to capable of casting it, but they were happy to learn.

She'd let them learn for a while longer. If it came down to it, they could channel her as a magical source. It was a gateway drug. Anyone who had touched the power of a djinn always came back for more. It was addictive. Like her touch. Everything about a djinn was addictive.

Charity drew another sigil on the ground, "Last one for today. This is the essence of light. Probably one of the more dangerous ones. Don't try it if I'm not around, or you might burn off the ground and bury this island under the sea. Other things too, but that'll be the first concern."

One of the mages, leaned forward, tapping it slowly, "This is a name, isn't it? The symbol of the sun?"

"Yes." Charity said with a grin, "It's the sigil of Sumner. She was one of the lost gods, even before the calamity. Not technically lost. She... Gave up her life to create the Fae. Reincarnated as one of them. She's dead now. Summer. She was the wife of the head of the new pantheon. Trei. I know. Complicated."

The mage frowned, "Why does the sigil still work then?"

"The sigil represents the power." Charity shrugged, "When the gods died, the power just made new ones, or brought them back. You can kill a god. You can't kill what a god is. Not without ripping a hole in the 'verse, anyway. Like Tyr tried."

They both smiled at her. They weren't children, but they weren't adults either. Something in between. Body and mind of an adult, but a blank slate. They had a general knowledge of the world, but nothing more than that.

They weren't human, either. She should have expected that. Every time someone tried to make something that was human, or older, they failed. She'd made a new race, in a world still trying to come to grips with having multiple races living in the same space.

They looked human, almost. Basic shapes. Except, the hair of everyone in Mania was white, black for Order. Two subspecies. Similar, but not the same. Beyond the hair, were the eyes. The colours were vertically split, with the inside edge being one, and the outside edge another. Apart from that, they almost did seem human. But she knew they weren't, which meant she needed to treat them different.

Let them decide for themselves what they wanted to be. How they wanted to be. They had no culture. She was going to do her best not to contaminate whatever they created with her own bias. They might be able to create something better. Clean. Without hatred against race, or magic or gender or sexuality or all the things she watched one human kill another over.

She knew the chances of success were low. But these were her people, now. She would have to be responsible for them. To try and show them a way forward, whenever they looked lost.

"You know, you make my life really shit, Charity."

She turned in surprise, staring in absolute terror at the man leaning up against her cubby's wall. He smiled at her. The smile didn't touch his eyes, those endless black eyes.

"Trei." She whispered, barely perceptible.

He shrugged, crossing his arms, “Inventing a new species? Shit, woman. Did Hope locking you up teach you nothing? Seriously. You’ve had a long time to learn what is okay to do, and what is not. You actually intended to make them.”

Her students looked from one to another, and one stepped forward, “Don’t speak to her like that.”

Trei glanced over at the man, staring into him, and the student fell to his knees, crying. The god sighed, “Sorry. Didn’t mean to do that. I guess you’ve never felt fear before. The best way out, is to grow comfortable with the feeling.”

Charity swallowed nervously, “I didn’t mean to make them, Trei. I meant to make the village. They’re not an accident. They’re... Them.”

“I know.” He replied, reaching down and picking up the scared mage, patting him on the back, “I’m pissed, but I’m hardly going to condemn people I don’t know.”

Charity smiled weakly. The god walked over to her, glaring, “I’m more pissed about what you know. What you concealed from me, and the others, but mostly me. See, whilst you were enjoying your new bedmate, I got access to your memories. The ones that Hope sealed.”

The djinn took a step backwards, “She didn’t want you to know. Faith didn’t want you to know!”

“My daughter is alive.” Trei growled, “It hurts that she doesn’t want to see me, yes. But you could have at least said. I’m not about to drive her away by looking for her.”

Charity winced, “Hope made the decision. I’m sorry. I didn’t vote either way.”

Trei shrugged, “Like I said, I’m pissed, but I’m not about to do anything. I am actually here to... Help. With this place. You can’t just create a new race without attracting attention. Kru and I have reached an accord. She won’t invade and kidnap all of your people, if you agree to a celestial adviser to the city.”

Charity looked at the mages, “This is your home. Do we fight the gods? Or cooperate?”

The man shrugged, and looked to the girl, “I don’t know. You’re faster than me, Viviane. What do you think?”

“We have to ask Order. And everyone else. This needs... Can everyone be part of the decision?”

Charity laughed, “Yes. A vote. That’s democracy. A rare political idea. Hasn’t survived much into the modern world. Last democratic state was... Mishia. They got wiped out by Falenthia. Democracy can be good. It can be bad.”

Trei patted her shoulder, “Not bad. Have a vote. We’ll know the outcome. If you agree, then we’ll send the adviser. She’ll appear in a flash of light or something obvious. If not... I can’t stop Kru if she attacks. Things are not stable up there, at the moment. The gods are... Most of our resources are currently being spent dealing with fallout of the Sins waking up.”

Charity nodded, “Sure. They’ve had a hundred years. Deux, why don’t you gather everyone? It’ll take a while.”

Viviane nodded, “I will go to Order. They’ll have some ideas of how to run things. Not a bad idea to let them.”

Trei leaned against the wall again, “You need to let this city take care of itself for a while, Charity. You can’t be here when they get back. The adviser can help them... But you’re about to

be at the frontline of a war. They don't know what fear is. How would war shape who they are?"

Charity glared at him, "I will protect them. They're mine."

"Fuck you, little djinn." Trei snapped, "What could you possibly do by yourself? Show how brutal you can be? You will go fight Alfar's war, and I will protect your people. I've already agreed it with Kru. They won't see anything. The village won't be part of normal reality for a while. Not until everyone is ready."

Charity clenched her fists, "You can't do this."

"It's done." Trei stated, "I didn't have a choice. Because of you. You never think things through, Charity. Your magic is more a curse than a blessing. You think you know it, but you still reach for it. You have to learn."

"I have to fight." Charity snapped, "I am one of the Nine."

"Then why are you sleeping with a Sin?"

She looked down, "Because... Because I don't even know why we're going to fight. Why we have to."

"You don't." Trei smiled, "You don't have to fight, Charity. Be cute with Amayo. None of the gods will try and break you up. Prove that this doesn't have to be a war."

"I can't let Akheron become the new king, either."

Trei shrugged, "I can't tell you anything on that, one way or the other. But, Charity. The Nine... Though you can fight, the gods know it... None of you are supposed to. You. Chosen for being overly generous. Temperance, a wyrm who knows a stillness in her soul. Mercy, a woman who can talk down armies. Oleta, a woman of renowned humbleness. None of you are warriors in your soul. Don't scar yourself by reaching for war. Aurili doesn't need to know you."

Charity glared at him, "You shifted my house. You've already made the decision. This is why I hate gods."

"Better than letting Kru kill you." He shrugged, "Now, if you done being a child, I do have a compensation for you."

Charity ground her jaw, "What?"

Trei vanished, and in his place Amayo appeared. Except his wings were singed and smoking. His eyebrows were curled, and he coughing lungfuls of black smoke. She could feel mixed in with the red dust falling from his skin.

Charity dashed forward grabbing him, "Shit. What did Trei do to you?"

The Fae looked at her, "Charity? How did you find me? Oh shit. Wrath. He's going to be so angry with us."

Charity kissed his forehead, "Screw that. You're under my protection now."

Temperance

Her head throbbed. The pain thumping away with each beat of her hearts. She groaned and clutched her head. Though, apart from what almost felt like a crack in her skull, she was comfortable, which was odd. She was in a human town. She'd almost expected the suffocating feeling of one of their beds.

Temperance rolled over, opening her eyes and glaring. She could smell him. Smell his arrogance. "Did you have to hit me so hard?"

Nidoghr looked up from where he was sitting, looking hilarious. The bulk of a wyrm sitting on a human stool. Like an adult sitting on a child's plaything. He shrugged, "I thought it was necessary, sorry."

No more explanation. No excuses. That wasn't what he did. She wanted him to give an excuse. To try and apologise for hurting her. She knew he hadn't meant to. That he'd panicked when faced with the idea of her losing control.

She put a hand on her forehead, casting a simple healing spell. She glared at him, "So how goes the solitude?"

The wyrm shrugged, "I am faced with a decision that threatens it. Not something I am interested in discussing with you, Temperance. It is my own. How goes the war?"

Temperance winced, "You know what? I'm willing to listen. Kao just informed me that Hope is missing, that Faith was trapped inside an eternity crystal by Wrath. That she wants me to lead the Nine."

Nidoghr shifted uncomfortably, "You've never welcomed my advice before."

"No. Temperance swallowed, "Please. You think I... I'm asking, Ni. I've never asked, and I don't plan to ever to be in your debt again. Ever."

The wyrm looked at her slowly, his eyes burning, "Well. That means I have to tell you about me, then. I know you're trying to be nice, Tempi, but you've said the wrong thing. Wrath met me, on the road."

Temperance winced, and let out a growl. She wasn't threatening him, it just seemed that the curse words of the other races weren't enough to express what she was feeling.

Nidoghr didn't even smile. "I agree. Wrath gave me an offer. He would grant me solitude, and non-interference, if I did just one thing. If I found a way to keep you calm."

Temperance laughed slowly, "I've spent my life training myself to keep calm. I know I lost it... I know. But... You piss me off, Ni."

He shrugged, "I know. My choice? As I see it, the easiest way to keep you calm is to tell you, face to face, that you will never ever see me ever again."

Temperance smiled slowly, "What's the difficulty in the choice?"

"I broke my solitude to see you." He replied, smiling weakly, "Not just to antagonise you, Tempi. I came to see someone I thought long dead. Someone I cared about. I warned you... Because I still want to keep you."

"Arrogant jerk." Temperance shook her head, "I think I've made it clear, I don't want you. At all. I don't want you near me, Ni."

He shrugged, standing, "Then you get your wish. I'm returning to my seclusion. You are safe. I don't expect you'll lose control again."

She screamed and punched the ground, cracking the diamond with a thump. She looked in surprise at her bloodied and broken hand, "I didn't mean to do that... Ni... I didn't lose control over some gems. Important yes. Worth killing to make a point? Maybe. Kao kind of encouraged that. Losing control? That... Had more to do with you. With.. Damn it. I don't hate you."

Nidoghr looked at her in surprise. He didn't say anything. She'd floored him. He wore that same dumbstruck expression he'd worn when she'd chosen to walk away after his failed attempt to kill her all those years ago.

"I don't trust you." Temperance said slowly, "Which means there's exactly zero chance of my ever trying anything with you ever again... But I don't hate you. I miss you. I was missing you when you turned up. Turned up and showed me myself. Because that's what you do. You're a mirror. Showing me what my past looks like. Making me judge myself. Hate myself."

Nidoghr frowned, "So what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing." Temperance winced. "I'd hate myself if you left. I'd get upset and dealing with emotions like this... They're complicated. Difficult. I'd also hate you if you tried to stay."

Nidoghr laughed slowly, a growling echo, "So what you're saying, albeit less clearly than usual, is you want nothing to do with me, and I shouldn't be attaching myself to you."

Temperance smiled slowly, rubbing her forehead, "I guess."

He shrugged, "Point taken. Now let me give you some advice, unwanted. Don't go up against Wrath. You'll lose. Hope thought that Wrath was a Fae, because of the scale of his power, right?"

Temperance nodded, "Working theory."

"He's a Fury."

She blinked in surprise, "Powerful for a Fury. Most are less than Fae. How did Wrath do it?"

"Akheron is his heir."

Temperance's eyes widened, "Oh no. Please don't say that."

Nidoghr smiled grimly, "Like I said. If you go up against Wrath, you'll lose. He's assembled every surviving infernal to his cause. He created the Hunters' Guild, to manipulate two world empires to a knife edge. Because when people get this desperate, they get stupid. They invent things that shouldn't be imagined. Falenthia and Zanfir are not exceptions, but they are his toy boxes."

The wyrm turned and left.

She didn't try and stop him. She tried to ignore the ache in her heart. Watching him leave. Just like she'd made him watch her leave, once. She knew it had hurt. But they could never be together. Not ever.

She didn't hate him. Her life would be so much easier if she could just hate him. It would let her forgive herself. Let her move on and search for some kind of happiness.

Temperance clenched her fists. Happiness was what happened to people who weren't tools of the gods. Tools being used for the good of everyone, and the death of everyone after them.

Every time the gods got into a tiff, everyone suffered, even if the offender was removed. The Fall of Calis. The Calamity. The Godless Night. This world was doomed, past tense, already. How

much worse could it get?

To be destroyed, or to slowly die, every generation having a worse hand than the last. Watching the life drain from them all. It was the long-lived species, like hers, that got to watch this. Got to watch them all... Die. Die before they even knew they were dead.

“Akr’s a jerkface.”

Temperance turned in surprise, and bared her fangs, “Alfar.”

“You’re a jerkface too.” Alfar glared and then sighed, “I need your help. Will need it. Did need it? Akr kissed the Envy. He’s falling for her. Hook, line, and sinker. Falling for Wrath’s girl. Fallen. Swallowed? Embraced?”

Temperance looked at the overly cute looking elf, and swallowed nervously, “Akr. Is that Akheron? The Hellbound?”

“Hellbound Heir, Demigod of the Hells, brother to a murdered sister, son to a murdered mother.” Alfar clenched her fists, “Killed by the Nine, butchered at the edge of his Fate. Reborn to rule the world, and crush it beneath his heel. He will have his vengeance. In his next life.”

Temperance took a step backwards, letting loose a quiet cursing growl, “That was a lot less vague than usual. Are we screwed?”

“Shit.” Alfar moaned, “Why did you have to remind me I slept with him? He’s just so... Hot. Damn it. I want his fangs. I remember them. I have a girlfriend and you have to go and remind me about the future jerk.”

Temperance tried not to laugh. It was difficult. It was obvious to anyone that the elf was crazy about the Fury. She adored him, and apparently they would have quite the active sex life.

Alfar glared at her, “Not. Funny. I don’t want to like him. He’s a jerk. He kissed the Envy. After flirting with me all day. Before he promises me that he’ll never leave me. Before he breaks the promise. Forgets me.”

Temperance swallowed nervously, “Sorry. You’re absurd. As always. So, what do I owe the displeasure to, Alfar? Oh elf who was tried to kill a thousand times?”

“I didn’t try.” Alfar smiled, “I failed. Trying is different. People are different. Options are not always options. They smile and disappear like smoke.”

Temperance glared, “What the godsdamned fuck are you doing here, timeless elf!?”

Alfar blinked, “Trying to cheer you up. You dumped Ni. Again. He’s a grumpy fart, but you like him.”

Temperance twitched, “If that’s it, go away.”

“Ok.”

The elf vanished, and Temperance stared in surprise, also in shock at the tin box left on the ground behind the elf. She hadn’t expected her to leave. She also hadn’t expected the gift.

It was, a gift. Inside, Temperance found a stack of handmade sugar cookies, still warm. In a smaller section of the tin box, she found fresh tea leaves. Those very nearly made her cry.

They were of the aulsivian plant. Extinct. The only flowers that had ever grown had grown in her mother’s garden. She’d grown them there herself. She’d also destroyed them in anger when she’d left.

Temperance wept, on her knees.

Astarte

The elf left, quietly, and calmly. Astarte knew she would be back, as surely as she knew how much of an idiot her brother was.

She shook her head, glaring at him, “You’re throwing aside Alfar, the kindest sweetest thing, for a monster like that? The woman wears the title of Sin like it is something to be proud of.”

“I’m not throwing anyone aside!” Akheron said with frustration, “I know I screwed up and hurt Alfar, Astarte. I didn’t mean to. I still like her. I just... I’m trying to walk a line here. Because I have to. Adairoft is safer, because I did. I don’t know what I’m doing. You’re right. But right now, the politics of this fucked up situation, is more important than your brother’s first girlfriend.”

Astarte rolled her eyes, “Not really. You’ve forgotten a few things. Firstly, it only took a hundred years for two empires to suddenly be threatening to rip apart this entire plane. Second, we’re going to live for thousands of years. Politics? It doesn’t matter. No one here can kill us, and no one here can stop us. We stayed to protect Adairoft because there are friends here. I didn’t stay because of some twisted morality. Humans don’t mean shit to me, brother. They never have. Never will. A generation of them can die whilst I’m asleep in bed.”

He looked at her, “I know. But I stayed, because it was the right thing to do. I know you’ve never got that about me. But it is what I will do. Always.”

Astarte shrugged, “Sure. If that’s what you want to do... But don’t push too hard. Alfar is something. If there was a guy like that for me, I wouldn’t be letting him go as easily.”

Akheron rolled his eyes, “I seem to remember running here because there were too many guys for you. Come to think of it, they might have been as violent as Alfar, too.”

“Goblin heads aren’t cute!” Astarte stamped her foot, “Alfar is cute embodied. Geeze.”

Akheron seemed to think for a moment, “Totally. I caught her dancing earlier.”

Astarte broke out into a grin, “And you’re passing up that? For an elf who already has a boyfriend? Who has the title of Wrath?”

“Politics.” Akheron stated, making it obvious that this was no longer up for discussion.

She shrugged, “Sure. I’m just looking out for my little brother.”

He laughed and looked at her, “We hatched at the same time. And you’re a fair bit shorter than my now.”

Her elbow hit the centre of his stomach, keeling him over instantly. “You look shorter than me, from here.”

Akheron wheezed his laughter.

She sighed, looking around, “Well, I’ve got some things to do, Akr. If the future king of a realm that doesn’t exist can bring himself to, can you see what I need to do to fix the roof?”

He shrugged, “I know we agreed you would, but I’ll try and fix it.”

“You’re magic sucks.” Astarte replied, “Just materials. Or I’ll get so annoyed I’ll have to turn around and fix it.”

“Perfectionist.” He teased from where he was sitting on the floor.

Astarte grinned down at him, “You know you love me.”

“You? Yes.” Akheron said, and left the unspoken question and answer hang in the air. She kicked him in the leg.

She stretched her arms, “Anyways. I’m off to talk to the creepy underground mage circuit. I’ve got some ideas they should be able to help me out with.”

“Careful.” Akheron replied, “That’s one line of revenue we don’t want to lose. Not if we are going to make sure we don’t cheat.”

Astarte nodded, “Yep. That’s why I’m not sending you. Stay safe.”

She appeared in the street in front of the abandoned house, glaring. Her face felt like someone had tried to burn it. She could feel the scales beneath her skin rearranging, diverting the heat.

She hadn’t expected that. The house had a series of protections against transporting directly inside, but she’d never been diverted before. She usually walked through layers upon layers of protections like they weren’t even there. Her brother would shatter them and walk through. Astarte tended to just side-step them, but this was different.

Designed specifically with her in mind. She could walk through it now. She’d seen how they were holding the magic in place, but that seemed unnecessarily rude. They wanted things on their terms.

She stepped up inside the building, sighing tiredly as she heard a series of whispers moving around her.

Astarte waited, tapping her foot impatiently.

“What do you bring?” A voice whispered behind her.

“Impatience.”

The shades and other minor spirits controlling the shadows of the house, and sounds of the creaking wood, swirled into activity. Contacting their distant masters.

It was annoying, being handled like this. Every time she had met a king they had tried to put on airs, just like this. Force her sit in a waiting room, whilst they studied her reaction, trying to pretend that they were doing something more than mildly ticking her off.

Astarte followed the trailing lines of each spirit, and slipped a tiny circlet of magic into place. It wasn’t powerful magic, but it was precise. The spirits reacted almost instantly, falling and beginning to fall apart.

The magic wasn’t painless. Spirits were only held in place by their master’s will. Without the will to keep them intact, they were beginning to dissolve. Which is where some of the precision of her magic came into play, ensuring that the spirit didn’t. That instead it would writhe in agony, and that sound was all that the one at the other end of the contract could hear.

If they were going to make her wait, she was going to ring the bell in the waiting room, loud and clear.

A figure in a hood appeared, “What are you doing!?”

Astarte snapped her fingers, and her magic dispersed. “Sorry. I don’t like dealing with middlemen. I assume you’re not just another projection?”

The figure sighed heavily, “There are protocols in place for a reason, adventurer. You have now been blacklisted. I have only come to judge whether or not you should also be executed.”

She winced, “Now see, that’s a problem. I have tried to be... Polite. My request is of an unusual

nature, and requires more than your usual attention. If however, your little cabal of sorcerers and contacts across both empires really wants to tick me off, keep going.”

The mage sighed, “Execution, then.”

“Kneel!” Astarte snapped, her eyes flashing red in the dark. Her magic shot through the spirits that had just a moment before been bound to her. Every sorcerer and mage bound to the abandoned house fell to their knees as the muscles in their legs disengaged.

The magic continued on its way. Every single mage that was in contact with another was used as a conduit. A pathway for Astarte to channel her commands outwards.

The mage gasped, leaning on his hands, as Astarte walked over to him slowly, “I am now connected with a good chunk of the Federated Darkness. What an interesting name for your organisation. Interesting goals as well. Not entirely in conflict with my own. Now. My brother may be stronger than I. That is without debate. But there is not a single mage in your organisation that has my skill. Not one. Do not make an enemy out of me by proposing that my death can even be ordered by the full might of your people.”

The man hit his hand weakly on the floorboards, struggling to breathe. Except he wasn’t. It was just a feeling she was impressing onto his mind. Far easier to warp the mind than attack the body.

“What... Do you... Want?”

“Materials.” Astarte stated, crouching in front of him, “I am hunting, a Sin.”

The mage looked at her in terror, “No.”

“Yeah.” Astarte grinned broadly, “I’ve even met the Envy. They are already here. Awake. So. Do you think the Federated Darkness is interested in supplying me with I want?”

The mage winced, “May... Be...”

“I was going to offer payment.” Astarte grinned, “Until you threatened to kill me. I don’t appreciate being threatened by a mortal. I fought in the Godless Night, you puny fucking human. I could wipe out a third of your organisation, right now. How about I spare you from immediate death and also don’t deliver the names and locations of every single one of you to the Hunters’ Guild?”

The mage winced, “I don’t... Have that... Authority...”

“Sure you do.” Astarte laughed, “I know your name, you festering dickwad. But names are banned in here, aren’t they? Even for a member of the House of Mok’tar.”

The mage flinched visibly, “How...?”

“You are nothing to me.” Astarte shrugged, sitting down cross-legged. “Mostly human. Entirely mortal. Electrical impulses control the way your muscles react. The way your lungs breathe at the command of your brain. The way your heart beats. The way you form thoughts. Compared to me, your biology is ridiculously simple.”

“That... Level of... It is only theoretical.” The mage gasped, “We haven’t even... Mapped... Half... Of the human... Brain... Let alone... Multi-species...”

Astarte laughed, picked him up slowly, “Dude. I finished mapping the systems of humanity years ago. I’d be happy to share my research. But, if you or yours ever threaten to kill me again...”

He nodded slowly, “We welcome an exchange with you, adventurer.”

“Good.” She produced a list from up her sleeve, “These are rather exotic.”

Mikhael

He stood at the end of the red carpet, not quite sure what to do. Whether to stand at attention, or just wait for the overzealous guards to lower their polearms and let him through.

The Vizier had asked for him, by name. The interruption had been perfectly timed to get the mage to back off. That, he had been grateful for. Not so much the invitation itself.

There was only one reason he would be invited here. His loose connection with the Hunters' Guild. A group that, though powerful, was now having their members eliminated by a particular elf anytime they did something she didn't approve of.

The Vizier was only in place because of the Guild. His advisers were dying, which would make the Guild uncomfortable. Question his ability to lead. Throw in the Hellbound Twins, powerful mages who had been evicted from the Guild, and you had a shitstorm of politics that would rain chaos down.

"Let him through."

Mikhael walked slowly passed the guards, knowing that if the Vizier suddenly had a change of heart, they were skewer him where he stood. He might be able to fight for a moment or two afterwards, but he would still be dead.

He paused in front of the throne, and bowed.

The Vizier sighed happily, "Ah. Now there is a man who knows his place. I am getting so tired of people who don't recognise or respect my office. I believe that you know most of them. How is the Guild hunter? I understand he was nearly killed by the elf?"

"She allowed him to live, lord." Mikhael said, still bowed, "He appears to have recovered, and is at Alfar's Spice, along with several other warriors."

"Alfar's Spice." The Vizier said bitterly, "I never thought it would mean anything. The elf warned me, when I granted her permission to open a tea shop. I laughed. Told her she'd never be able to turn a profit. She told me that I could channel the entire treasury into closing it, and I wouldn't be able to do much more the break a window. She appears to be right. The Guild will fine me, quite soon. Fine the city into bankruptcy. If the elf is not killed."

Mikhael didn't say anything. There was nothing good he could say.

"How much of a folly is attacking the elf, in your very experienced eyes, Mike?"

A direct question. He had to answer, "May I speak freely, within the confines of my experience, lord?"

The Vizier sighed, "No. Guard your tongue. Be honest, but not disrespectful."

"The Guild will fall if they dedicate every resource in their vast capacity to destroying this elf. The Guild could use a superweapon capable of destroying this entire continent, and it would not kill the elf. You cannot attack in a way that she does not see coming." Mikhael emphasised, "You could place an unstable person near her, someone unpredictable, who just happens to attack, and she would see it coming. It is not intent that the elf sees, lord, it is the future. You cannot attack someone and win if they both know you will attack, and have infinite time to prepare for your attack. She has both of these. Killing the elf, is not possible, lord."

Tane sighed heavily, "Fuck."

Mikhael agreed. The Guild had probably reached a point where they knew they could not kill

Alfar, and so had decided to find a scapegoat. An excuse to destroy the entire city. Even if Alfar survived, they would do it. Nobody would believe her, she'd go back to being just another insane voice in the throngs of refugees.

Adairoft had been sentenced to death, right after surviving the threat of another war. The city would be destroyed, as an example. The Guild couldn't afford to be seen as weak, or one of the two empires they had whipped into a frenzy would attempt to absorb them.

The delicate peace that Zanfir and Falenthia shared was due only to the enormous organisation that enjoyed the fragile peace. This extremely rich group was the political force in the world. However, if they lost face, if anyone dared to show that they were weak, then the situation they had created would blow up their faces.

Mikhael sighed heavily, "May I suggest something unorthodox, lord?"

"You may not." Tane said with irritation, "My choice has been made for me, already. The Furies. They've claimed the city as their own. They will tolerate my existence, but nothing more. Nothing outside the castle walls. Furies. Do you know that humanity doesn't mean anything to those beasts? They are the nightmare of beastkind. The one we whisper to our children. They actually fit it. We are nothing to them."

He didn't say anything. He had a feeling that Tane was just thinking aloud, and wouldn't like to be reminded that there was anyone to actually hear him.

"They kill Guild members, without expecting reprisal. They talk about armies invading as if it's a nuisance. That if they didn't have to defend the city, they could simply destroy the entirety of their invaders. We're just cattle, to them. The death of city... Inconsequential. They live for thousands of years. Fifteen generations of humanity is just one thousand..." Tane sighed heavily, "Mikhael. Find a way to kill the elf. If there is one. Or we're all going to die. Either by bombardment, or as slaves to beastkind. That's no future. Not for a human."

He bowed lower, "Lord."

"Now, get out."

He did another bow and turned and left, wincing as each pair of weapons slammed together behind him. Despite the fear of imminent death, he was more afraid of the corner that the newcomers were painting them all into.

"I hate you."

Mikhael glanced to the side, "Feeling is mutual, elf."

"I still can't die." The elf shrugged, "That is one thing you say right."

The man who had been an adventurer up until he realised he was getting too slow for it, a man who knew his limits, turned to the elf, "They will destroy the city. Do you care?"

Alfar laughed, "Destroy the city? With Akheron in it? That isn't possible. It never happened. Not once. He won't let it. He cares. Astarte, no. Run for the hills. She won't protect people who call her beastkind. Akheron... He cares. Idiot. Not like any of you care about him."

Mikhael sighed, "So I have to trust the guy who wanted to cut off heads for a living? With the fate of an entire city?"

"No." Alfar said with frustration, "I went to all the effort. You idiot. Ali. Malis. Astarte and Akheron. Izak, you and I. That is a team that won't fail to stop the Sins. The only team, even when we fall apart."

“The Sins are not our first concern!” Mikhael yelled, “The Guild is coming for this city. People are terrified, and hiding indoors. The guards are mobilised, but they were prepared to have a siege against Zafir, not their own. Morale won’t survive it.”

Alfar glared at him, “Stupid. Idiot! The Guild works for the Sins. Already. Past. The Envy is their leader on this continent. The Wrath was their founding member. This war, that haunts your nightmares, you stupid pseuelf, is theirs. Their purpose forged. The point of the war is Akheron. Always has been.”

Mikhael swallowed nervously, glaring at her, “You’re telling me that the entire fate of our world, is to be decided at this frontier town?”

“I opened my shop here.” Alfar smiled at him. “Just like you will. Which brings the Hunters, and means that Akheron meets them again.”

Mikhael groaned, and clenched his fists, “The Hunters looking at me brought Akheron back to their attention. Is that it? Is that how I was the catalyst?”

Alfar shrugged, “Probably. But... I don’t care about that. It wasn’t avoidable, that’s enough for me. Like a sugar cookie.”

He glared at her, “If we’re going to survive this, survive the Sins, the politics, then we’ll need you, Alfar.”

“Nope.” She shook her head, “You need them. I don’t help. I don’t wanna help. I want to make tea and play with my dog and pretend that the ‘verse doesn’t hate me.”

She was crying by the end of the outburst. He wasn’t sure what to make of that. It was difficult to guess Alfar’s age, even though he’d lived amongst elfin, when he was younger. She didn’t seem to age like the others. Like parts of her aged, but others didn’t.

She held up her hair, “Look at it, Mikhael. What do you see?”

He shrugged, “Hair?”

“Not just blonde.” Alfar glared at him, “Streaks, of white and black. Pieces of Ausosa, imprinted on me the moment she curses me.”

Mikhael winced, “Well, that sucks. Why are you showing me?”

“Because you, Mikhael, son of Fagstar, son of Alfreth, are an idiot.” Alfar replied, “I don’t get to be part of events. Not ever. Well, sort of. The gods are banned. Trei bans them, when he builds his castle in the sky. I have the fragments of a god’s soul embedded in mine.”

Mikhael sighed heavily, “I thought you were friends with Trei’el, with Aurili’el. Wouldn’t they give you some space?”

“Eiden.” Alfar said, grinding her teeth, “I just told you, that they don’t. All I can do is set things in motion. Like gathering all of you. Trei only lets me stay if I don’t do stuff. And I don’t want to do stuff. Because it hurts. Dyys didn’t just die, Mikhael. Not at the Godless Night. She was already dead. A lich. So how did Pheter kill her? He trapped her soul inside his. So that when we killed him, we left her to an eternity of agony. True eternity. And nothing will ever interrupt it.”

Mikhael sighed, “I guess you get to see all of that. Over and over.”

“It never ends. All moments last forever.” Alfar whispered, wiping the tears from her face, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I want a forever moment with Malis. She’s nice.”

“Don’t break her heart.” Mikhael half-jokingly said. Alfar glared at him, “I do, Mikhael. We both know it, because I remember it. Shut up about things you can never understand. I am a person. I don’t know why it is so hard for all of you to understand that, but you never do.”

Then she was gone.

Leaving him alone, with just the guilt.

Akheron

Hands snaked around his waist, and he heard Rsja whisper in his hear, “Astarte said I couldn’t pull your pants down in front of her. She’s gone.”

He sighed heavily. It did feel nice to be held. His tail tightened around his waist, “Not yet. Rjsa.”

She shivered at her name, and sighed, leaning into him, “Who was the other elf? I’ve never met anyone like her. In another age, she would have been considered to join us. As a member of the seven.”

Akheron frowned, “Alfar. She’s a lot like you, in some ways. If someone mentions her, she knows it. Always. You don’t even have to use her name, and she’ll know it. The seven... Why were the Sins assembled? Who did it?”

“Complicated.” Rsja replied, her fingers now still as she held him. “We were assembled because of a threat. A dire threat. We defeated it, in the end. Or, at least we sent it away. Made it get bored of attacking and meeting our resistance. It was a Fae. A very powerful Fae. His name was Tyr.”

Akheron smiled slowly, “Fuck. Of course it was him. It took Trei ascending to stop Tyr. Of course Tyr tried other ways to screw with us all.”

Rsja sniffed him, and then paused, “Trei. I’ve heard the name a number of times since I got back. A new god, right? Yet you said... Ascended.”

“Trei was human.” Akheron replied, “He died, and was resurrected as a ghoul by Summer, Queen of the Fae, and the reincarnation of the lost goddess, Sumner. I’m not exactly sure how, but eventually Trei became... More.”

The elf squeezed him tightly, “A human. A human? That frail and pathetic race? Please tell me something non-human also ascended.”

“Eventually.” Akheron laughed, “Kru, a Fae, also ascended. She became... Trei’s opposite. She gets in his way, and he gets in hers. They were the first two, of an entirely new pantheon.”

Rsja spun him around, “A new... Pantheon of gods? How much have we missed?”

“You woke up because of the Godless Night.” Akheron said slowly, “What do you know of what happened there?”

“Pheter died.” Rsja shrugged, “He was a Fae who very nearly became a god by his own efforts. His girl, Ausosa, attempted to ravage this world.”

“Ausosa was Tyr’s wife.”

Her ears pulled back, but she resisted hissing, with some obvious and not insignificant effort. “What happened to Ausosa?”

“She was killed by the new god of war.” Akheron replied, “After she killed almost all the old gods. Some of them came back, most didn’t. New gods have replaced them.”

Rsja smiled, “What is the name of this new god of war, so I can pray my thanks?”

“Aurili.” Akheron replied, “She was human. Also, a friend of Alfar.”

Rsja stared at him in a mix of shock and horror, “Human. Again. What did we miss? You don’t get it, Akheron. The seven were assembled to create the power of a god, or as close as we

could get, at the time. Not one of us is of the same species.”

“Combining your attributes, to try and recreate the original species.” Akheron nodded, “Wintralassa is certainly a force to be reckoned with. Drak’tur was.”

Rsja frowned, “I know the name Drak’tur. A mad mage who created orkkind. The other I don’t.”

“Drak’tur, before he turned himself into an ork, was a Protoanimarim. One of the First People. Wintry, is also one of the First People. She lives with her girlfriend, in the Palace of the Gods that Trei built.” Akheron sighed, “Wintry is... Scary. She’s usually nice, but the amount of magic she has at her disposal dwarfs my own. She doesn’t draw from the lifestream. She stole the magic from the gods, herself. She’s the one who kickstarted the original war against the gods.”

Rsja grinned slowly, showing off her insets, “You’ve met not just a First, but the one who stole the magic?”

“Just once, in passing.” Akheron replied, “Kao was passing through. She stopped by to see how we were doing. Trei... Sort of adopted us. Our mothers both died fighting his war.”

Rsja frowned, thinking, “Is... Wintralassa... The girlfriend of Kao? The goddess of chaos? The original goddess and most powerful god in all of existence?”

“Mostly right.” Akheron nodded, “Except that Trei and Kru both outstripped Kao a very long time ago.”

Rsja shook her head, smiling, “Well. I guess we’re not as powerful as we thought we were. I would hate to bring your adoptive father down on us.”

“He won’t.” Akheron said grimly, “I wish he would stop you. I don’t like what you’ve been doing. But, Trei and Kru agreed not to directly interfere in... Non-celestial events. A treaty, to keep reality intact after it was nearly torn apart by Tyr, then Kru, and then Ausosa, and finally, Pheter. Trei will leave it to us to stop you.”

Rsja smiled, putting a hand on his chest, “It is immensely cute that you think you can. But you’re being selfish, Akheron. My king. We need you. The heir of the hells. The world will need you to be that, and soon.”

“Explain it to me, then.” Akheron insisted.

Rsja sighed, “I’m... Not authorised to. I’m the least of the Sins. Alfar was right about that. The weakest. The Pride has reserved the right of explanation to you. I... If he wished to kill me for stealing that honour, than Wrath would probably let him.”

Akheron glared at her, eyes flashing, “You can’t make me trust you by intimidating me, Rsja.”

She shivered, and glared up at him, “Oh you know what that does to me. Don’t tease. It won’t always work for you.”

Akheron flashed his fangs in a smile, “And you won’t always be able to distract me by flirting.”

Rsja thought for a moment, “I... Might be able to tell you a little. But not for free. If I’m going to be punished, I want it to be worth it.”

Akheron knew the cost. And knew that Alfar already knew what he had done. This was why she was angry. Not the forehead kiss. She’d been angry about that because it opened the door to this situation.

“Oh that woman.” Akheron laughed softly, “She’s every bit as under my skin as you are. You

know Alfar will make you pay for it, right?”

Rsja smiled slowly, “Concern for my wellbeing? Aren’t I the one torturing you?”

He put his arms around her stiffly, surprised by how soft she felt against him, “You say you have a very good reason.”

Rsja smiled lopsidedly, “Oh fuck. You’re picking this up way too quickly. Lust would be impressed.”

He leaned down, and kissed her.

He didn’t know what he was doing. He’d never kissed anyone before. He was hesitant, and gentle. He breathed in through his nose, as he slowly tried to convey the emotions he was feeling to her. The ones that made him feel strange and lightheaded.

Rsja relaxed into his grip, her hands holding him against her. She felt like all the fight had gone out of her.

Akheron had no idea how long had passed. It wasn’t the most intimate kiss in the world. There was no tongue, and scrabbling of hands. No desperation. Just a moment, where the two of them relaxed into each other.

Rsja broke the kiss, pushing him back weakly, breathing in deeply, as if she were dizzy.

Akheron felt a profound sense of disappointment, mixed with disgust. He really did want to keep kissing the woman who had attempted to butcher an entire town, just to make him understand how much he liked power.

Rsja smiled at him, “Down, boy. Wrath did not earn his title for no reason. But yes, that was... Wow. You do know how to kiss. You’ll have to tell me what minx taught you, one day. So I can thank her.”

Akheron scratched the back of his head nervously.

Rsja blinked. “Oh. Wait. I got your first kiss? No wonder future-seeing elf was pissed. I would be. I’m surprised she didn’t interrupt us.”

“She knows it is a price.” Akheron stated firmly, trying to remember exactly what he’d agreed to.

Rsja nodded, “Fine. Yes. We call you the Heir of the Hells. Yet, as you keep pointing out, the Hall of the Hells was destroyed. During the Godless Night, from what we’ve heard. You are the Heir, because you, one day, with our guidance, will recreate it. You will want to recreate it. Saying more is... Not for me. This wasn’t for me to do. Wrath is so angry with me right now.”

Akheron almost pitied her, the way she looked. Almost. She hadn’t made up for endangering an entire city. His city.

Rsja smiled sweetly at him, “Don’t freak out.”

The elf disappeared in black flames, screaming in agony.

Akheron’s stared at the spot she’d been standing in. Seemed one of the Sins had decided to have words with her, already. That they’d been watching. More than that, the black fire. He hadn’t seen anyone use that in a very long time.

It was hellfire. The mark of demons, Furies, and the hells. It wasn’t something others learned easily. One or two had, mostly gods or god candidates.

He had to talk to Astarte.

Alfar

She smiled, holding her arms around Malis. Enjoying the moment, as the two looked at the sunset.

Malis looked down, at the hands she was holding. Alfar smiled, “We look beautiful together.”

Malis shrugged, “I was looking at the contrast. My dark skin, your ridiculously perfect white skin.”

“That doesn’t matter.” Alfar said quickly, “We look beautiful. Who cares if you’re part goblin? So what. One of the Sins is a goblin. And he’s probably the second most powerful shaman to have ever lived, after Shannon.”

Malis turned her head, “Did you just try and compliment me by saying I’m like one of the freaks that just sent an army towards us?”

Alfar frowned, “Yeah, I guess I said that wrong.”

“Yes.” Malis laughed and kissed her cheek, hesitating. “But I liked the effort.”

Alfar squeezed her, “I ruin every romantic moment, don’t I? I even brought you here. To see the sunset.”

Malis turned back, “Sunset by the water. I’ve never been to the sea before. It really is amazing. I can’t see the end of it. I can see the way our world curves, but not the end of the sea.”

Alfar nestled her face into Malis’ neck, “Still not as beautiful as you.”

“Aw.” Malis said sarcastically, “That’s a nice sentiment.”

Alfar blew a raspberry onto her neck, causing them both to giggle, “I don’t do that, Malis. I’ve seen every sunset. Every mountain and valley. They lose their appeal. You don’t. You’re beautiful.”

Malis shivered, “So you don’t lose interest in me one day?”

Alfar stayed quiet, trying to make her mind come up with better explanations than she actually had.

Malis shook her head, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“You deserve an answer.” Alfar said softly, and sat down, pulling Malis into her lap. She hugged her tightly, not wanting to let her go. “I break your heart, I do. I hurt you badly enough that... What we’re doing, as a group, here... Almost doesn’t work. But I never stop caring about you. I never lose interest in your beauty, or your courage.”

Malis sighed heavily, “This is shit. I wish I hadn’t asked. I wish I didn’t know that you know how this ends. It hurts like hell.”

“No.” Alfar replied, “It doesn’t hurt like hell, not yet. The Hells... We end up there, Malis. The real hells.”

The woman stiffened, and turned her head to look at her, “We end up in hell? What the godsdamn fuck?”

Alfar shrugged, “Has to be lived.”

Malis frowned, “I can make you tell me anything, can’t I? If I push?”

“Yes.”

The woman turned on her side, snuggling into her, “Well, that’s a magic I never thought I’d have. Not sure I like it. Don’t let me do that, Alfar. Not if it risks the world.”

Alfar smiled down at her, and brushed aside a tangle of her black hair, “You don’t know how cute you are. Especially when you want something.”

Malis grinned at her, “Oh, I really like it when you say things like that... Why are you trying to take things slowly with me, Alfar? Surely that’s driving you nuts. You already know what you want.”

Alfar smiled, “Because I want it to last. Forever. I do not always succeed in keeping you. Even for the time we have. I don’t want to push you away.”

Malis pushed Alfar down onto the grass gently, “Then, you know what I want you to do. Now.”

Alfar grinned, “Yes. But... Try and keep the expectations lower than they are.”

Malis looked hurt, and confused. Alfar didn’t explain, she knew she shouldn’t. Instead she reached up and dragged the woman down to her, and kissed her. She smelt the flare of hormones as the instincts of Malis’ father kicked in.

Goblins didn’t fall in love. It was one of the reasons they were able to commit the atrocities that they did. When they came of age, they felt the need to mate. It was a short, albeit brutal, time of life for them. A year, where desire completely overrode all conscious thought, and every other instinct. Many starved to death, as the sexual drive forced them to become monsters.

Alfar poured magic out through her mouth, letting Malis breathe it in. Reinforcing the parts of her that were human. Holding her steady.

Malis pulled back, staring at her in terror. Alfar caught her wrist before she could run away.

The woman glared, “No! Let go! You don’t know what I-”

“Yes, I do.” Alfar replied sitting up, and putting a hand on Malis’ chest. “Calm. I know. It was just an instinct, and I helped you keep it in check, and I always will. Kissing a girl who hadn’t had her instincts wake up yet was always a risk.”

Malis glared at her, “I wanted to hurt you. I can’t... We can’t be together if I want that.”

Alfar rolled her eyes and tucked her legs around her waist, “I’m not letting you go, Malis. I know the feeling is scary, but you and I can find a balance for you. And I am not totally adverse to you ripping my clothes off.”

Malis shook her head, crying, “No. I’m a monster.”

“You’re cute.” Alfar retorted, getting irritated, “I knew. Before I met you, I knew about this, Malis. I’ve accepted the risks. I still want to kiss you.”

The young woman shook her head, “I don’t understand. At the training house... Why didn’t I feel any of this?”

“You were too young.” Alfar replied, pulling her into a cuddle, “You might have hit human puberty, but not the other.”

Malis held her, but kept crying, “I don’t want this. I’m a monster. I’m not safe. I hate this. I hate me. Why do I have to be like this?”

Alfar stroked her hair gently, “You’re not. I like you, Malis. All of you. Especially the goblin who was arrogant enough to form a contract with the goddess of chaos. A partnership, with a god.”

Malis whispered, “And the part of me that wants to bite you?”

Alfar shivered, “Oh yes. Yeah. I like remembering that.”

Malis pulled back, staring at her, “Well. Wait. We actually sleep together? You’re telling me that I’m okay with this, at some point?”

Alfar grinned at her, “You need to trust me, Malis. You’re scared, because you can’t trust yourself. So don’t. Trust the elf. I am not an unskilled mage. I was raised in Mishia, I reconstructed a hellhound. I know... Sex usually requires trust. More for you, considering the shit at the training house. Even more for you, because you will be entirely vulnerable. You have to trust me.”

Malis bit her lip nervously, “We need... A way for me to tell you to stop. A way to get me to stop.”

Alfar grinned, “A magic word. That will lock in the part of you that is goblin, long enough for the human to take control.”

Malis glared, “I don’t like that you remember this conversation.”

Alfar held up the bracelet from the necklace, “I’m going to give you a word, that makes this activate and lock around you. Suppresses the magic in you. That same word will deactivate it again.”

Malis frowned, “That’s... I sort of like that. What word?”

Alfar shrugged, “Needs to be something we won’t accidentally say. Something random. Surprising.”

Malis nodded, thinking, “I guess... Spider?”

“Ew.” Alfar shivered, “That works.”

She touched the necklace gently, and then let it go and grinned, “And now you’re out of excuses not to kiss me.”

Malis smiled at her, “Just how excited are you feeling?”

Alfar laughed and lay down, pulling her on top of her, “There is no answer to that, that you like.”

Malis tried to kiss her gently. It didn’t work. Her eyes flashed from brown to a startling green, and Alfar felt herself make an embarrassing sound as the woman held herself against her, firmly.

Magic embraced the both of them, helping Malis straddle the line between self-control, and unbridled passion. It was tempting for Alfar to let it go. To let Malis lose control and do everything she hungered for. She knew it would make her mad, though.

She’d been waiting for this for a hundred years. She could let the woman tease her for a little while.

Teeth brushed her neck.

“Eiden.” Alfar said, her mouth drying out.

Malis

She'd never felt this alive. Like her veins were on fire, like her heart was beating through the roof. Every sensation exploded in her mind. The barest touch of Alfar's skin made her almost salivate. Made her toes curl up.

Her underwear was completely ruined, and Alfar hadn't done anything but kiss her back. The elf was gentle, and quiet, letting her be the one leading this. Just holding her in check. She could feel it, the magic. She felt like if she tried, she could break the spell holding her control in place.

She wanted to, but she didn't want to scare herself again. She wanted to show respect towards the woman with her. As much as Alfar said she had to trust her, the elf was also trusting her to behave.

"Bite me." Alfar whispered in her ear as she teased. She knew how to do a love bite. The training house had taught her. Gentle, but firm. Somewhere that was sensitive, but not too sensitive.

Her teeth pushed down onto Alfar's flawless skin, and she felt the elf squirm underneath her, crying out quietly. As if she was holding back, trying not to make a noise. Except they were alone here, at the sunset. She wanted to hear the elf.

Malis pulled back, glaring at the elf. She could see better now. See the individual pores of the elf's skin. She was even more beautiful than she'd realised. How had she got this lucky? Even when she'd tried to push her away?

"I will make you moan." Malis grinned, "Whether you want to or not."

Alfar blushed brightly, "It's... Embarrassing."

Malis grinned and shuffled down, kissing gently on the inside of Alfar's leg, "I told you, you don't have a choice in this."

The elf struggled to breathe, "I love it when you're like this."

Malis glanced up, "I can tell."

"Take them off."

"Nope." Malis laughed, "Not until I hear you."

Her hands shook as she touched Alfar gently, hands travelling up her legs, but not quite far enough. Tantalisingly close. It was hard to keep herself in check. Something in her chest was screaming at her, desperate.

She felt surprise as Alfar suddenly flipped her over, pinning her wrists above her head. The elf smiled and kissed her neck, causing ripples of pleasure to crash through her like waves. She glared at the elf, "I... Wanted for you..."

Alfar bit her neck, cutting off the thought. Malis felt her legs shaking as the pleasure burned through her, as she felt the elf's hand not just touch her.

Her eyes rolled back in her head.

The pleasure was ripped away from her with a scorching blast of heat. Malis sat up, glaring angrily, and saw a mage in a hood, standing with an outstretched hand.

She could see traces of magic in the air. She'd never been able to see magic before. Sense it, maybe. Now she could actually see it, see the way the mana strove to align with the flow of the

lifestream.

A roar ripped from her throat, an angry sound that made the human in her recoil in horror and terror, unable to process it.

Malis flipped to her feet, and felt a firm hand on her shoulder, she glared sideways, wincing and trying to contain herself as she saw Alfar there, smiling. Irritated, but smiling.

She cracked her neck, "Fuck. You told me to keep low expectations. I thought it was because of what I almost did."

Alfar smiled, "Yeah, nope. Hello, miss hunter. Zanfirian. You even have a storm stone. Pretty. Go, you don't want to stay."

The mage moved their hands silently, forming a new spell. Malis could see it. See the lines of mana moving through the air, curling up into the spell. She reached out, instinctively, using the power that Kao had been gathering for her, and she tugged at a single strand of the mana.

Light flashed, and she felt Alfar toss her into the ground. She looked up at the elf as she screamed, flames burning behind her, into her. Alfar was using herself as a shield.

Malis felt the entire world drop. The heat became less intense, light faded almost to darkness. Touch felt almost numb.

Alfar breathed heavily, smiling, "Geeze, Malis. Forcing a rebound?"

The elf rolled off, landing on her back with a gasp of pain, as Malis sat up again, staring at the charred bones that lay just a few strides away. She'd done that. She'd killed someone.

She bit her hand, tears forming in her eyes.

Alfar put a hand in her lap, "Calm down. We gave them a chance not to fight. It isn't like anyone can actually kill me. But no, the Sins want me gone, now. Did before, but didn't know me. Now they do. Envy explained me to Wrath, and he got wrathful. Full of wrath, just like a bag of dicks."

Malis glared over at her, "I just killed someone! I can't... I was a slave, Alfar. I can't kill. I can't..."

Alfar sat up on her elbows, "I'm sorry. You're not a monster, Malis. You're a fighter. You've spent your life thinking you're just some tiny creature... But you're not. Never were, never will. You yell at Mikhael. Show attitude."

Malis sighed, "I get angry."

"You get brave, too." Alfar smiled, standing up. Her dress fell to the ground, and she stared at it in surprise, like she'd already forgotten being scorched by flames as a spell went sideways.

Malis blushed, looking down as she felt the hunger like a kick in the gut. "Clothes, please."

Alfar sat in her lap, ignoring her. "I like you, Malis. All of you. Courage. That's you. You didn't get scared when the mage attacked us, you got mad. That is... Sexy."

Malis smiled up, seeing the expected blush on the elf's face. "Do elfin talk about sex?"

"No!" Alfar said, blushing even more, "Private. Private more than age. Never kiss, never tell. I will be thirty before my mother explains the connections between... Monthly stuff... And sex..."

Malis frowned, "Oh. I guess... I know my education was incomplete. Because I expected it would be painful, and terrible. But I was taught. Young."

“Too young.” Alfar shivered, curling up inside Malis’ arms, “It’s cold. We both get taught at the wrong ages. Too late, too soon. It is meant to be special. It is special. I never touched anyone. Not before you, never. No other timeline.”

Malis held her gently, “You could fix your dress. That’d be warmer. It is special. I felt special. Even if I wanted to hear you.”

Alfar kissed her cheek, “You will, but not yet. We’re needed. This was all the moment we got.”

Malis found herself grinding her teeth with irritation. She didn’t want the rest of the world, not right now. All she wanted was the woman with her.

Alfar smiled, “You throw up. Just warning.”

The world shifted, swirling violently and quickly.

Charity

Amayo had fallen asleep, almost straight away. Sweating, and crying. Whatever Wrath had done to him, it seemed to have severely traumatised him. Charity had seen her fair share of trauma before.

She'd always seemed to get bound to the helpless, the hurting. That was the life of a djinn. She'd known one or two others. They managed to find kings and princes as their masters. It was her luck to find orphans and thieves.

Until she'd found one particular orphan.

Charity mopped his brow with a soft rag, fighting back tears. She'd barely shared a moment with him, and for it, he had been tortured. He wouldn't want her, now. He'd go back, and she'd face him in battle, and she'd be forced to kill him.

She'd be forced to use her magic as a weapon against the Sins.

She wanted a chance for this to work. A chance to prove that a Sin and one of the Nine could be an item. That it didn't need to be war between them.

The Nine had been established to stop the end of the world. That was it. The world was already doomed, it was doomed the moment the Calamity had happened, when fire had fallen from the sky and the Fel had infected everything.

Then the Godless Night had happened. Ausosa had killed everyone. Heroes, and gods alike. Wiped them all out, overnight, leaving only a handful of people left in the world that were actually capable of doing anything about it.

Those were the first two signs of an ancient prophecy. The Hellbound Prophecy. Which claimed that two twins, born of a snake, would destroy the world and everything in it. That they would remake the world into the eleventh circle of hell.

That one of them would die, and the other would give up on living. That when one of them died, the other would destroy everything. That they would wipe out humanity. Wipe out the elfin. Kill everything that wasn't infernal.

She was infernal, but she had a feeling opposing the prophecy meant that her own death was probably inevitable. Fighting destiny was always a death sentence, or worse.

The Sins had destiny on their side. Their idea seemed simple enough. If the Hellbound Prophecy was true, and inevitable, then they would find the king, they would raise him, and they would make sure that he preserved the world's peace as long as possible.

The Heir was destined to kill them, too. To kill everyone who assisted them, or helped them, or delayed them, or hindered them. In short, everyone that the Heir stumbled across would end up dead.

The Hellbound Prophecy was a typical doomsday rant. The problem was that the prophet who made it was ridiculously good. Her prophecies had all come to pass. Every single one of them. She had been the First Sibyl of Mishia. The first, First.

She'd even predicted the Godless Night, something none of the gods had been prepared for.

Amayo sat up with a gasp, eyes open. He swallowed nervously, and then collapsed back onto the bed of pillows. He sighed, looking at the ceiling, and saying nothing. She could feel the depression eating at him without trying.

"Talk to me." Charity said, pouting, "I can't help, if you don't talk. If you're going to dump

me, get it over and done with. If you have to kill me, say it.”

Amayo laughed slowly, “Dump you? Kill you? No. I mean, Wrath would like it, sure. But the Sins are all equal, all family. Wrath was just going to burn me alive for a hundred years or so. And he did. You... Yanked me backwards through time. Impressive, and extremely creepy that you can do that and not know the punishment.”

“Trei freed you.” Charity said quickly, “He... Wanted to make up stealing my people from me.”

Amayo smiled at her, but she could see the pain in his eyes. The pain of someone who really had been burning alive without relief for a hundred years. A trauma she was completely unequipped to deal with.

He rolled his eyes, “I can still hear your thoughts, girl.”

Charity shrugged, “So what do I do?”

He held out an arm, “You could hug me. I haven’t had contact with anyone for a long time.”

Charity lay next to him, wrapping an arm and leg around him. She glared at him, “If this is what you get up to when I’m not around, you’re not leaving me behind, anymore.”

Amayo smiled and kissed her nose, freezing as he did. She could see tears appearing in his eyes. “Sorry. I’ve... Wanted to do that for a long time. I know it hasn’t been long for you.”

Charity glared at him, “Dude, just shut up. I like you. Okay? I. Like. You. So, stop trying so hard. If you’re going to collapse into some pathetic puddle, I’m not going to tell anybody. Because you’re my puddle.”

Amayo frowned, “Are you getting possessive, djinn?”

“Yes.” She said with embarrassment.

The Fae rolled over to face her, “Wait. Really? We’ve talked a couple times and slept together. That’s all. We’ve both slept with more than a few people. It doesn’t have to -”

She put a finger to his lips, “I already told you to shut up and not be stupid. You spent a hundred years burning in hellfire, for the right to date me. You know something is different. I... I wouldn’t mind if we never had sex again, I’d be disappointed, but I could live with it. But... I don’t know if I could keep going if I could never hear your voice again. I don’t know why, so don’t ask.”

The Fae smiled slowly, “Can I something?”

“Depends how stupid it is.”

He grinned, “Sort of stupid. You look really cute when you’re mad at me. The tiny horns, the soft curls framing your face.”

Charity growled and then shook her face, “You’re trying to distract me. Which means you know something. What do you know?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

Charity slapped his face softly.

Amayo rolled his jaw, “You know, you’re the first girl who has ever slapped me. I know, surprising.”

She held up a hand again, he laughed, feigning fear, “Okay! Okay. Well... You won’t like it. Really. When I broke the kiss, the first time... I felt something else. Ethereal. Celestial. I can see

some of the celestial things. I have a red thread tied around my left wrist. The other end, is tied around your throat.”

“Throat?” Charity asked in surprise. She knew what he was talking about, but it was always a wrist. Dragging two people together. She’d never heard of the thread of Fate being wrapped around someone’s throat before.

Amayo nodded slowly, “I think, and I’m just guessing... That I get the usual choice, to ignore my destiny with you, and instead choose unhappiness. But that the Fate who bound us decided that you aren’t going to have a choice. Know any Fates you’ve pissed off recently?”

Charity shrugged, “The Nine aren’t on good terms with any of them. The Sins are the servants of Fate, and we’re standing against you. Trying to change fate. So. I’m head over heels for you. I can live with that.”

He blinked, “Really? I haven’t made you go running for the hills?”

“I’m a djinn.” She grinned leaning in towards him, “Running away isn’t really in our nature.”

He grinned at her, “You know, whispering in my ear... I’ve thought about that.”

Charity moved the leg that was lying over him to wrap fully around his waist, pulling him in close to her. She didn’t say anything, just looked him in the eye, watching him. She could feel him responding, but she could also feel him fighting it.

Amayo sighed, “I’m Lust. I’m not sure this is a great idea. Maybe I should take things slowly. Romance. I’m not skilled at that. You should know my flaws. What kind of jerk I can be.”

“Screw that.” Charity snapped, “I don’t care, Amayo. That... What you’re suggesting, would be extremely boring. Look, I do what romancing. And I’ll give you some too. But right now, I have my boyfriend back after a hundred years. So I want to check he’s intact.”

He rolled his eyes, “A hundred years for me, nothing for you.”

She grinned at him, “And?”

“And... That’s about my limit.” He laughed, and kissed her nose, “You can do whatever you’d like with me. Anything at all. Shoot. I thought I’d be in control of this. You are, aren’t you?”

“That’s not it.” Charity smiled, “It’s love. You want to be mine, and I really want to be yours. So... To try and make this everything I want it to be... You can do anything you’d like to me. Anything.”

He rolled her onto her back, arms above her head, grinning down at her. “Well then. I guess it’s time to tease you. See what your limits really are.”

Charity felt a shiver run down her back, and swallowed nervously.

Then his hands touched her gently, finger creeping under one of her silks, touching her soft skin. It was electrifying. Felt like lightning touching her. She gasped softly, despite herself.

He wasn’t even doing anything yet.

Temperance

“I thought we should have another chat.” She said quietly, sitting comfortably on the throne.

The Kai stared at her, and looked to his guards for a moment, and then relented. “What do you want? Come to curse us more?”

“In a way.” She sighed heavily, “I’ll be leaving this city, soon. I’ve already made the Guild pay for taking from me. I expect they’ll re-establish their presence. Try and make you pay for their debts. However, it might temper them if you were to tell them who it was that attacked you.”

The Kai frowned, “Why do you care? You killed sixty people. You shook the entire city in your rage.”

“That wasn’t rage. That was a headache.” She smiled from the throne, “I don’t want to make an enemy of you, Kai. My roost, in the port? I plan on coming back to it. I like it here.”

He winced, “Then the Guild will kill us all. They might not be able to kill you. But they can burn the city to the ground.”

“If you tell the Guild that Temperance, frostwurm of the Nine, is responsible, then they won’t exact so terrible a price from you. They know who I am. I’m... One of their enemies. Or rather, their founder knows me. He’s still quite angry at me, but that’s to be expected.”

The Kai swallowed nervously, “Your enemy of the Guild? And you’re still alive? How is that possible?”

Temperance smiled, “Like you said. They can’t kill me. Well, not yet anyway. We’ll see. Let them know it was me, and that the Guild was stealing from me, and they’ll give you some mercy. Not a lot. It isn’t in Wrath’s nature to be merciful.”

The man nodded slowly, “And what of this city? You say you’re coming back. Do you plan to own us?”

Temperance glared, “Oh, shut up. Falenthia owns the city. I’m not going to try and make some new city state. I’m a wurm. I haven’t lived this long by making ridiculous and stupid mistakes.”

The Kai spread his hands, “You attack my city. Kill the main force we have to defend it. We’re one of the most important ports in the empire. What if Zanfir attack? Or pirates?”

Temperance shrugged, standing up, “Zanfir is going to attack, unless I miss my guess. Send for reinforcements from the capital. I’ll be at sea, attempting to stop a navy I know is already one the way.”

The Kai stared at her, “What? Zanfir wouldn’t risk attacking Falenthia so openly. We’re right on a knife edge.”

“Pre-emptive strike.” Temperance said, walking away from the throne, “The plan is to wipe Rhara Bag out before Kabad can notice. They will see smoke from this city burning after the army they’re bringing besieges that city. There won’t be a chance.”

The Kai swallowed, “How do you know?”

“Wrath is going to encourage them into battle.” She replied, “The Guild are responsible for these two empires. They want them to fight. To create chaos. Everyone who will die in the coming war... Will be sacrifices. They will make Wrath’s magic stronger. Strong enough to ascend.”

The Kai winced, “Who is Wrath? The founder of the Guild?”

“The Guild was created as a weapon, to help bring about the end of the bloody world.” Temperance smiled tightly, “By the Sins. Speaking of which, one of the Sins is coming here. If you fight them, you die. If you tell them where I’ve gone, to sea, they’ll leave you be. I’m scared of the Sins, Kai. Don’t fight them.”

He laughed, “I wouldn’t. Not to give you up.”

She shrugged, and then leapt off his balcony, soaring over the city. She’d said enough, she hoped. Enough to prepare them. Because she knew now what was at stake. What was about to happen.

The Sins had been preparing for this for a long time.

There was only one possible way forward, that she could guess. That Mercy had become the Witchqueen of Zanfir to fight them, and they had tried to kill her, and when they failed, they would have bound her.

Bound her at sea, because that was the only way they could possibly contain the most powerful earth magus in the entire world. If she set foot on land, then anyone who attacked her was at risk. She was merciful. She was also completely unstoppable.

Wrath would be draining the magic from her, using it to fuel his preparations. Which would necessitate a fleet. A fleet to either transport weapons, or carry mages storing her power.

This was the only thing Temperance could guess at. She was guessing. Kao might have entrusted the whole of the future to her, but she was working on instinct.

Kao had told her of a town, but also told her she couldn’t tell her much. So she’d asked the baker about the town. About Bocheon. Something had happened there. The Harrowing of Bocheon.

Ten legions had appeared out of nowhere. Five by sea, five by land. They’d surrounded the city, and destroyed it in a week. There was nothing left of the city. The city that was there now, was built over the top. New settlers, new farmers. Zanfir had colonised the ruin, shifted the border in their favour.

Temperance was hoping that this was Kao’s hint. That forces were about to come crashing down, to take the port. This city was in a perfect strategic location. If it was taken, Zanfir might be able to tip the balance in their favour.

A world at war.

That horrifying vision that would kill generations of men and women. It would hundreds of years to recover from that much death.

She landed outside the bakery, and entered slowly. She smiled sweetly at the woman who was more scared of her than ever, and sighed, “I’m leaving, for a little while. I’d like to keep my home intact, somewhere to come back to.”

The baker swallowed, “I can’t take responsibility for it.”

“Oh, never mind that.” Temperance grinned, “I’ll handle that. But, it is on top of your house, so I owe you rent. For the time I’ll be away.”

She put a small pouch of stones on the counter, and turned around, smiling as she took in the smell, and the light. Enjoyed the homely feel of the place, a place she knew she wouldn’t see again. Not anytime soon.

She was going to see nothing but pain and hardship for days, weeks and months. She was going to war, to save her friend.

"You look grim, wyrm. It doesn't suit you." The baker said, placing a pastry in her hands, "You're going to do something, aren't you? Something... Violent?"

"Maybe." Temperance smiled weakly, "I'm off to find one of my friends. Powerful like me. We have... Enemies. Powerful enemies. Ones that make the best in your Guild look pathetic. Ones that can fight whole armies by themselves."

"You can do that." The baker laughed, "I have no doubt of that, m'lady."

Temperance picked a piece of the pastry, eating it glumly, "I'm weak compared to the Sins. Compared to Wrath. He's a nation killer. He destroyed Kato, by himself. Have you heard of Kato?"

The baker frowned, "A nation in the west. The edge of the continent. About as far from here as you can get, I think. They disappeared. Something about the moon."

Temperance nodded slowly, "He blacked out the sun, and the moon. Most magic comes from one or the other. Most powerful sources we have. So Kato lost their mages. And Wrath didn't lose his. He burned them alive, with hellfire."

The baker shivered beside her. Temperance smiled weakly, "That's why I'm here. To protect you, and everyone else. Why I'm awake, anyway. Came here first for the gems, sure. But I'm leaving, to try and make sure the city isn't destroyed. It will be attacked. Soon."

The woman tensed up, and Temperance smiled weakly, "Don't run. You're safer here. You don't want to stumble on the encampment of a legion of soldiers trying not to be noticed."

The baker winced, "You speak like... This is going to be another Godless Night."

"No." Temperance shook her head, "The gods have very little to do with this. No. This is because someone screwed with time magic. A long time ago. So we have to deal with heir, early. The Heir of Hell."

The woman shook her head, "I don't want anything to do with this."

"You won't." Temperance smiled tightly, "I'm doing the very best I can. We all will. To make sure that none of you are involved in this."

The baker shook her head, "I don't like this. It feels... Wrong."

"It should." Temperance growled, "The Fates are against us. Against humanity. That... Has never happened before."

Astarte

They were waiting for her as she left the abandoned house. Hunters. She'd felt them appear, heard them vomit from the splitting. Someone had actually willingly fired themselves through a dimensional splitting, all to get a chance to try and hurt her.

She assumed they meant to kill her. The Guild and the Sins required Akheron, they didn't need her, and her ability to steady her brother was probably an intense irritation to them.

Astarte smiled, standing and watching the mages fire off spells at her. She didn't shield herself. She simply picked the spells apart before they could hit her, causing them to rebound wildly back into the caster.

She heard the modern weaponry cock behind her. Dwergaz inspired, Zanfiran enhanced. Bottled lightning to burn the air into plasma and discharge it directly at her. Astarte spun around, diverting the plasma passed her and into one of the other hunters. Who fell to the ground screaming. Not dead. Wounds cauterised. Just disabled permanently.

She flicked her wrist, transferring the handheld cannon into her own hand. She hooked the handle onto her tail. She yawned tiredly, waiting a moment as she shredded spells and crossbow bolts.

Astarte counted a moment, and then snapped her fingers, "Kneel."

The hunters gasped as she stripped their strength, and their ability to fight. She stood over them as they hit the ground, too feeble to even yell out for help, not that it would do them any good.

"I don't like being hunted." Astarte said with irritation, "I am not, prey. Let whoever resurrects your pathetic souls for information know that."

She cut off the signals to their brains, killing them all. The body wasn't dead, not yet, but soon.

She stepped passed them, walking through the now deserted town square towards Alfar's Spice. The entire city was hiding in their houses, not fully understanding what was happening. She didn't understand everything that was happening.

There was no elf greeting her excitedly at the door, which was disappointing, but she could hear quiet singing and a shower running. She smiled to herself. Alfar was always a ray of sunlight.

She needed a ray of sunshine. She and her brother had come here to escape everything, to start over and pretend they could live normal lives. Even though neither of them every could. They'd known that from the moment they were born.

It wasn't a shock that Akheron was supposedly some heroic champion of destiny for the Sins. He was one of the most powerful creatures that had ever been born. He wasted his magic on explosions, a kind of magic that was inefficient, and made him seem less powerful than he actually was to the people around him.

Akheron would never admit it. Wouldn't submit that he wasn't an incredibly disturbing source of power that had never been seen on the mortal plane before.

Astarte on the other hand, was willing to admit what she was. Even as a newborn her power had exceeded every non-celestial who was not her brother. If he didn't exist, then she would still be the most powerful by a long shot.

Even against the Sins. They were absolute masters of magic. She could feel that difference between them. Their affinity for magic is what caused the mana flow to favour them over herself. She'd spread her knowledge to thin. A passing familiarity with everything had made her a master of nothing.

She was a threat to the Sins. That is why they'd just tried to kill her, despite knowing it would anger her brother if they succeeded. She wasn't as weak compared to them as they'd like her to believe. She'd seen Alfar make a mockery of one of them, because she was more skilled than they were. Not more powerful.

Alfar wasn't quite a fair comparison. Even if Alfar had let the Sin hit her, it wouldn't have done any good. Damage to the elf was only ever temporary, because she was the definition of permanent.

Astarte sat down at a table, smiling as she saw a tray of tea and biscuits waiting for her. She wanted something more substantial, it being after sundown, but she'd accept the hospitality. Especially the sugar cookie. Alfar made the best sugar cookies she had ever tasted.

She picked it up, breaking off a piece with a fang. The sweet taste flooded her mouth, and she grinned despite herself.

Astarte cursed herself slowly.

There was no one else in the room. She could feel the poison constricting her throat. Violent, and fast. Her lungs were already beginning to shut down. Liquefying.

Poisoning a Fury was impressive. The only plants she could think of that were responsible were from the dead realm that had enslaved her muk'to. One in particular came to mind, right as her teeth began to fall out. A red flower.

Astarte slammed one of her claws into the back of her other hand, spilling blood instantly. She traced her blood with a shaky hand, burning a sigil into the top of the wooden table. It wasn't much. It wasn't even real magic. In her current condition, she couldn't use real magic. her body was focused on self-repair, and utterly failing.

She slumped backwards in the chair as her back muscles began to spasm, losing control of them altogether. She was entering the last stage before dying. Unable to control the simplest of things.

Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she wished she'd remembered to be more cautious. To remember that some people actually did know how to kill a Fury, and the Sins were utterly motivated to do so.

That the attack earlier had been nothing more than a polite greeting. A warning that she had now become something of interest, having attempted to gather materials to use against them. Trying to fight them had been seen as an overstep.

"Al'an hol'a sa'taia!" Came a familiar yell, and Astarte groaned as the white light surged across her body, purifying it. The healing was immediate, reverting the damage the poison had done ridiculously quickly.

She sat up, coughing weakly, "I wasn't sure you'd come."

"Always." The man replied and looked around, "Where have I come to? Did someone seriously get the drop on you in a cafe? In... A border town?"

"Adairoft." Astarte said hoarsely, and smiled, "This is a friend's place. I didn't expect it. I

was stupid. Sorry.”

The man shrugged, sitting down at the table. He wasn’t wearing his armour. In fact, from his unbuttoned shirt and wet hair, she’d caught him having a bath. She couldn’t help but smile at the sight. He was every bit as sexy as he had always been.

He waved at the table, “You called me, and not him. Should I read anything into that?”

“No.” Astarte glared at him, “I needed the healing of a paladin, that’s all.”

The man sighed in disappointment and then looked at the tea on the wall, “I... Some of those are from other worlds. Other realms. Your friend just displays millions of bricks worth of gold?”

Astarte shrugged, “I’m sure money means about as much to her as it did to me when I was willing to cheat. She’s timeless.”

“Alfar sa’Hera.” He nodded with understanding, “She knew your mother, did she not?”

Astarte shrugged, “Something like that. I like her, so be polite. I think that’s her singing.”

The paladin cocked his ear, “There’s two voices there. You must really have been close to death, to miss that.”

Astarte sighed, “Nope. I missed it before, too. Damn it. I’m getting complacent. And there’s a Sin here.”

The paladin’s eyes locked with hers, “The Sins? Astarte. You should have called me earlier! You know why.”

She scoffed, “And what exactly would you do against any of the Sins, paladin? I’ve met Envy. She’s stronger than Akheron. More skilled than me. What would pathetic little holy knights do?”

“I’m supposed to be here.” He replied stubbornly, “You know that. You were the one who had the vision. I fight the hellhound.”

Astarte sighed heavily, “Akheron is summoning him soon. So I guess you being here was supposed to happen. But, just so we’re clear, I ran away from you to get here. Ran. Wanted nothing to do with you or the king flipping out with crazy gifts.”

The paladin looked at her, smiling, “Yeah, I know. I also don’t care much. I still love you, Astarte. I did know, always knew, that I was more of a toy than a boyfriend. I admit, I was exceedingly clingy after you dumped me. Or thought about dumping me, I should say. You’re not great at breaking up.”

She looked down at the tea, almost drinking it before remembering the poisonous biscuit.

He waved a hand over the tea, flashing golden light, “It’s fine. Now you have something to do whilst avoiding looking at me.”

“Dick.” Astarte muttered, and sipped the hot tea.

He laughed, “I don’t care, Astarte. I’ll behave, especially as my destiny is about to unfold. But... I love you. Wholly, and completely.”

Astarte shook her head, “Kregstad. I should have left the continent.”

Mikhael

The first thing that hit him was how much his head hurt. The second was that he was bound, and blindfolded.

The ground beneath him was rough, and shaped. Wooden planks of a floor. Damp to the touch. Old then, and probably indoors. In a space that got damp. Most poor areas, or the attics or basements.

He could hear the wind, soaring somewhere nearby. Whipping at bolted shutters. So they were probably in an attic then. Bound and gagged in an attic.

He knew he had people who would pay for his death, plenty of drunken sods he'd thrown out of his tavern. One or two who would pay handsomely if they'd learned that he was part elfin.

He couldn't think of anyone who would kidnap him.

A trickle of a thought passed through his mind, as he lay trying to pretend he was still out. He'd been taken from Alfar's. He didn't know how that was even possible.

The timeless elf was one thing, but she swore up and down that the inside of her shop was another realm. If that was the case, then her enemies should have no way of leaving.

The hellhound was also supposed to protect it. Mikhael had seen what the creature could do if someone irritated it. There was a reason that it was called a weapon of mass destruction.

He only had one answer to both of those. That Alfar had allowed him to be taken. That she thought he was supposed to be here. Probably as some kind of catalyst for her favourite Fury twins. To make them understand the stakes at hand.

Yet, predicting the elf was a fool's folly.

He could probably break himself out of the particular bonds he was in. They felt like little more than old leather. Stiff, and weak. However, if he did that, without knowing who had managed to kidnap him, he'd probably end up dead.

They'd already proved once that they could beat him. Beat him badly, because he still couldn't remember actually being taken from the teashop. He had all his other memories back. That particular memory was all that seemed to be missing. No blackouts, no holes.

He knew of a couple alchemists and mages who claimed that they knew how to excise particular memories. They made a killing amongst trauma victims. Yet, the people who went to them usually seemed the victim. Blank, and hollow. They seemed more like they'd had their soul taken, than a memory.

This was not like that.

"No, little pseudo-alf. I am not cruel like that."

He sat up, slipping his legs over his wrists and yanked down his blindfold. No need for the pretence if they already knew he was awake. He was in an attic, on a half-rotten floor. Not a space he favoured fighting on.

Across from him, was something that shouldn't be able to stand on the floor, not without it giving way. It was huge, bigger than any he had ever seen. It had to crouch, and still the head scraped the roof. An ugly head, with tusks protruding from its mouth.

"You cruel in other ways, ork?"

The creature smiled at him, "Of course. After all, I am a Sin."

Mikhael flinched, "A Sin. Like the one that nearly killed the city without lifting a finger."

"Envy." The Ork nodded, "She is... Kinder than I. I would have butchered you. She did not. Yet, she achieved the same result. Akheron understood his place in this world, if but for a time. The other elf is infuriatingly good at distracting him. And she isn't even one of the Nine."

Mikhael shrugged, "Yeah, I don't know half of that."

"I don't particularly care." The Ork laughed, "Your understanding, or knowledge, is not required or encouraged for us to have a conversation. You need only listen to what I have to say. I do plan on killing you, once it is complete."

Mikhael winced, "Great. Am I to understand you think I don't have a choice in this one?"

The ork rolled his eyes, "Of course not. If you were to break the floor, as you plan, then I would simply be permitted freedom movement, whilst you lay writhing on the ground from a fall few humans would be able to survive. I would be unimpeded."

Mikhael laughed softly, "You're an arrogant one, even for a Sin."

"I am the Pride." The ork replied, "It is my prerogative. I am prideful, and enjoy it, for I have never been wrong. Drak'tur was never able to bring harm to me, and Kru considered me too useful to eradicate. I have wondered if I could survive the attack of a god, but thus far I have always predicted their attacks and been elsewhere. Do not think your elfin blood would assist you. I am the one who killed Alfiti, the Algar."

Mikhael winced, "Well, I'm not suicidal. So I guess I'll let you speak. And plan on running."

"Foolish, but expected." The ork replied, "As is the fact that Alfar has seen this, and sent someone to fetch you. You see, as much as the Sins wish to crown the next king of Hell, there is another group. The Nine, who are in some respects, our equals. They wish to prevent it, and in doing so, possibly prevent the end of the world. Alfar is as predictable as anyone else I have ever known."

Mikhael blinked in surprise, "Never heard words like that before."

"She is aware of every outcome, and is thus blinded by them. She can only behave in ways that are consistent to the future she believes is most likely to be currently unfolding." The ork said, spreading his hands, "As such, I need only convince her that one is, when another is truly happening."

Mikhael smiled, "You like looking smart. So I guess I have to ask. What do the Nine have to do with this?"

"Alfar assists them, on occasion. As she will wish to avoid my meeting Lord Akheron, she will send one of the Nine to this location, to free you. Because, as I have also predicted, you, little quarter elf, are essential for her plans of the future."

Mikhael frowned, "Essential? Seriously? I'm a tavern owner. Too old, or too slow to still be an adventurer. I cannot fight in whatever war is cooking up between you and Alfar and whoever these Nine are."

"Correct." The ork nodded, "Because I will take your life once our conversation is complete. You will not be afforded a chance to fight in our glorious battle, and will not be afforded the chance to impede it. You may believe yourself to be a small piece, too small to do anything, and you are quite correct in some respects. If you were to fight any of the Sins, you would immediately die."

However, you are not correct that any small detail cannot ruin even the best laid plans. I have used many small details throughout my time, to great effect.”

Mikhael looked down at his still-bound wrists, “Small details like the silver? If I break these, I burn. Don’t I?”

“Briefly.” The ork nodded, “A small detail that makes you hesitate. A hesitation that provides an opening. An opportunity to enable your death. One of the many opportunities I have ensured exist.”

Mikhael laughed softly, “Hesitation means you expected that I would notice the silver. That you predicted it. Aren’t I old enough to miss it?”

“I have provided opportunities.” The ork replied tiredly, “That hardly means that I expect you to require me to take advantage of them all. Like Alfar, I too can see the lines of possibility, unlike her, I can separate and assess them. Choose my avenues of approach. She cannot account for all timelines, because she cannot account for which one she is currently experiencing. Blinded by Ausosa. I am not.”

Mikhael shrugged, “Well, I guess that means I do nothing. Just wait. Because though you might take my life, and you might even succeed, you don’t know anything about Alfar. She is not as stupid as she seems.”

The ork nodded, “Fair. Her ability to detangle from all her experiences at all necessitates an above average intelligence. However, she makes very little use of it. Preferring not to speak of her experiences to her compatriots at all.”

Mikhael shook his head, grinning, “No. You don’t get it. You have your friends, sure. Probably even believe that gives you an edge. But Alfar doesn’t see time. Because she doesn’t experience it. She doesn’t detangle herself from it, because it doesn’t exist in the first place.”

The ork frowned, “There are few creatures capable of understanding that concept. I did not wish to overly burden your mind.”

“Lie.” Mikhael said boredly, “You went into this conversation on the premise you’d be talking over my head. You didn’t realise the full extent of Alfar. Which, I guess, means that you still don’t. Because I haven’t told you, because I’m not as stupid as you think.”

The ork grinned, “Interesting. You still fall within the parameters I set, but at the upper edges. You hide your intelligence well. Fitting, I guess, for one who held the chain of a slave capable of making an agreement with one of the old gods.”

“Leave Malis out of this.” Mikhael snapped, “You’ll regret it, if you don’t.”

“She is a tool of Kao’el.” The ork replied, “She has been pulled into this by her own accord. She signed an agreement to that effect. Leaving her out of it would place all the players at risk. Yet it does appear you have genuine feelings for the girl. Perhaps you should thank me for the mercy of your death before you can see what will be done to her by Greed.”

Mikhael broke the bonds on his wrists, and rubbed them, “And what will Greed do to her?”

“Ah, so brave, and so stupid.” The ork laughed, “The time for our conversation draws to a close, I’m afraid. I would like to continue to subvert your expectations. Unfortunately, the distraction that took Alfar’s attention is coming to a close.”

Mikhael winced, “Yeah. You expect we’ll all be dead by the time they send help, don’t you?”

“Correct.”

He didn't know much magic. Hardly any. He had avoided it for most of his life. But he did know one or two spells. Spells that had kept him alive whilst crawling dungeons he wasn't prepared for.

His hand slammed into the wood, "Eiden frak nau!"

It vanished, and they plummeted. The ork was correct, he would be fine and Mikhael might not be able to stand up. However, Mikhael wasn't the only prisoner the ork had taken, and he wasn't the only prisoner who had woken up.

Akheron

He'd chosen the location to summon the hellhound. That was about the limit of what he could without knowing more. The location was the obvious one. An island, inhabited by nobody, at the far north west of the world. Technically claimed by Zanfir, because nobody else was insane enough to sail that far to gain absolutely nothing.

However, he still didn't know anything about hellhounds, not really. He only knew one person with more than a cursory knowledge of it. Alfar. She'd rebuilt Garmr after he'd been dismantled.

Akheron opened the store door, "Alfar? I need to ask about-"

He stopped, glaring as he entered the room slowly. He did not like what he saw. The bloody sigil fading on the tabletop, and the arrogant prick sitting beside it.

"Kregstad."

Astarte winced, "I can explain."

"You were stupid." Akheron snapped, "You ate a poisoned biscuit that I can smell from here, and summoned your holy knight to come and cleanse your spirit."

His sister flinched, "Not like you came."

"You didn't even try and call me, did you?" Akheron shot back, "Instead, you called for the Paladin of the Holy Circle."

The man sighed, "Lord Akheron, we do not need to fight. I'm not here to disrupt things."

"Fuck you aren't." Akheron growled at him, baring his fangs, "You think it's your destiny to kill the hellhound that I am supposed to summon as a servant. And by your lack of reaction, my sister already told you."

Astarte sighed, "We have to fight the Sins. Might as well have destiny on our side."

"I don't know if I want to fight them." Akheron replied, "They're here for a reason, sister. They have goals. They are people, with belief. They aren't just here to kill. I've already got the Envy to back off the city, permanently. Maybe we should wait, and find out why they want the Heir of the Hells."

Astarte shook her head, "I hate it when you get like this. Angry, and stupid. The Sin is in the name. They have a goal, Akr. A really simple one. To restore the Infernal Empire of the Golden One. Hero's legacy. They want you to build the hells, and then they will turn this plane into part of that Empire. That is the goal."

"Since when did you care about mortals?" Akheron laughed, "Haven't we always ruled them? Wherever we went? They're too stupid and slow to realise what to do. They never have the strength or power we do, so never see the possibilities."

Astarte winced, "Oh shit. That elf got into your head. It isn't our right to rule, Akr. Didn't we come here to be nothing but adventurers? Indulging in violence and getting paid for it?"

"We did." Akheron sighed, smiling sadly at his sister, "But I don't think that's what we get to have. You're right. Destiny shit is happening. Right now, I don't get to fight it. May as well have destiny on my side."

The paladin sighed, "So, Lord Akheron, are you going to try and behead me again?"

"Not in my bloody shop, he isn't." Alfar snapped, appearing by a jar of freckled biscuits. She

picked one up and bit it, and winced, “Ew. Poison and freckles don’t mix. Did they have to poison the whole place?”

“What poison?” Malis asked, emerging slowly from the back of the store, brushing her hair.

Akheron looked around, “Hunters’ Guild? They’ve taken Ali, Izak and Mikhael. Where’s Garmr?”

“Angry. Pouting.” Alfar replied, “He knows that Gluttony is coming, soon. Hellhounds are like me. They don’t see time like you. Garmr is avoiding me. It hurts.”

Astarte sighed heavily, “So. They didn’t just want to kill me. They’re disbanding the little group. Sorry, Alfar. Wasted efforts.”

The elf stuck out her tongue, and then looked down sheepishly, “Sorry. My fault. I forgot about the attack. I was... Distracted.”

Akheron laughed, looking between them, “Wait. You, and Malis?”

Alfar glared at him, “Rude. Do you always have to be a jerkface? No. I’m not always interested in you, and I’m not going to be yours.”

Astarte grinned at her brother, waiting for his response. Excited to see how he would react to losing the first person he cared about.

Akheron sighed heavily, “I don’t mind. Malis is cute. I like her, too.”

The half-goblin stared at him in shock, and swallowed nervously, forgetting that she’d been brushing her hair.

He was telling a half truth. It did hurt, to lose Alfar to someone else. His sister had warned him to make his move, and he hadn’t. The elf had moved on before he had made a move at all. Instead, he’d made a political move.

Ignored his heart, and went for the other elf. The one who had tried to kill him with an army, just to remind him that blowing stuff up was fun. Alfar was fun, and beautiful and every time he thought about her, he remembered her dancing. He wanted her for being her.

He wanted Rsja because she knew how to make him feel a thrill. He knew it wouldn’t last. It was politically convenient, it was fun and made him feel amazing, but it was absolutely temporary. It couldn’t last. Because he didn’t care about her.

He didn’t want to protect Rsja, not the way he wanted to be there for Alfar. He would stand by and let one elf die, whilst he would risk the world for the other. Even if she had a girlfriend.

Alfar sighed, “You need to go and save them. We need Mikhael.”

Astarte smiled weakly, “I don’t want to ask, because it seems a bit expectant. But it would save us some time.”

Alfar rolled her eyes, “Top of the tower. Inside the abandoned house. The Federated Darkness are gone. Disappeared. Too many people asking questions. Wrath was wrathful. Unhappy. He didn’t like what you would do.”

Akheron sighed, “I’d rather not annoy Wrath just now.”

“You kissed her!” Alfar yelled, “Your fault Wrath is wrath!”

Astarte stood up, glaring at him, “You’re pissed I brought back the paladin? When you kissed Envy?”

Malis put her arms around Alfar, and the elf instantly relaxed into her, smiling a smile that Akheron had seen so often on his sister's face. The contentment. They'd slept together. That must have been violent, considering the girl was more goblin than human.

"I did." Akheron shrugged, "To get information. And the elf was punished for it. With hellfire."

Astarte frowned, "What?"

"Envy's boyfriend is Wrath, and he used hellfire." Akheron shook his head, "All the Sins are apparently different species. The idea being that together, they might be equal to a Protoanimarium. So... Wrath is a Fury. Or at least infernal."

"You're a Fury." Astarte stated, "If the seven were meant to serve you, I don't think they'd want another."

"They weren't." Akheron replied, "Not originally. They were created to fight Tyr. Apparently they managed to irritate him enough he stopped trying to conquer the West Continent."

Astarte nodded slowly, "Anything you can add, Alfar? We're always thankful."

"He isn't." Alfar pouted, "He's a jerk. He was even talking about me when he kissed the elf. Which is mean. Not like he even tried to kiss me. But, I like you, Assie. I can tell you all their races. That's not secret. Envy, the elf. Wrath, the Fury. Gluttony, the hellhound. Lust is a Fae, surprise, surprise. Pride, is an ork. He's super scary. Sloth is a Troll. I don't remember if he is alive or asleep. Hard to tell with a Troll that's been sleeping for so long. Greed... Is the Goblin King."

Malis stiffened, "Goblin... King? Is that how Envy brought the army here?"

"Kinda." Alfar smiled weakly, "Lots of goblins pretend to be king. There is one. A real one. He speaks, goblins obey. Genetic. Born to obey his will, his voice."

Malis put her head on the elf's shoulder, "So, I'm helpless in front of him."

"Pretty much." Alfar replied, and held up her hand, with a freckled biscuit. The half-goblin bit it, more out of obligation than actual gratefulness. Akheron could understand that. Knowing there was someone out there that could command her wouldn't be a comfortable feeling.

A feeling he was beginning to suspect that he would share.

Alfar

She always said more than she meant to. She hated it. Malis hugged her, afraid, because she had made her afraid. She'd been stupid and scared the crap out of her girlfriend. Hadn't even been nice when she asked about the power of the Goblin King.

The twins had gone to save the others. They would be a while. The paladin was busy trying to ignore her, sitting at the table. Alfar threw a rag at him, and appeared a bottle of alcohol beside him. He could clean the summoning sigil. It was a teashop, not a witch's coven.

Then she turned and took her girlfriend's hands, smiling at her sweetly, "You don't need to fear Greed. He likes you. A lot. Will like you. He won't hurt you. Never command you. Well, once. You kick him in the balls."

Malis glared, "Oh, void. Are you telling me I will have a goblin freaking boyfriend, one day?"

Alfar smiled sheepishly and shrugged, "Yes? A while. We have our moment. It happens first, doesn't it?"

Malis pulled her close and kissed her nose gently, "Yes. It's happening now. Our moment. We're okay. I'm... Getting used to dating a prophet."

"Not a prophet." Alfar pouted, "Prophet's serve a god. I'm a Sibyl."

Malis smiled and kissed her nose again, "Okay, my Sibyl. Getting there with it."

"Can you keep the affection to a minimum, please?"

Alfar turned, glaring at the paladin, "Oh, you fucking turd. You come into my shop, my realm, and you dare to try and tell me what is right, and what is good? What is acceptable, and what is not? I have walked with the gods! I have seen the end and the beginning and you don't even feature!"

The paladin held up his hands, "Wasn't trying to threaten. Just trying to be comfortable."

Malis frowned, "What is he talking about?"

"Racism." Alfar spat, "He doesn't like that you're not elf, and I'm not a goblin. He thinks of you as an abomination. Because you're not pure race."

Malis blinked back tears, and held her hand tighter. Alfar glared at him, "Insult either of us again, and my dog will eat you. If you're lucky."

The paladin sighed, "Apologies."

Alfar spun on her foot, facing away from him as angry tears sprang to her eyes. She knew she couldn't convince him. He was a piece of shit. Thinking that blood meant anything. That species shouldn't mix. Ignoring that every species had been created in the image of the First People.

Malis hugged her, "Hey. I've known people like that. All my life. Most of this city hates mongrels like me."

"I'll take your voice." Alfar said angrily, "If you ever call yourself that again. You are you. What you are is what you are. It is not trash. You are not a freaking mongrel."

Malis stepped back, "I'm sorry. I guess this means more to you, than to me."

"I... Live in Mishia." Alfar said with frustration, "A place where all were equal. Dwergaz, dragons. Orks and elfin and human. Living together as people. A hundred years ago. All equal. You expect me to tolerate him? With open arms?"

Malis smiled, “What about goblins? Were they equal in Mishia? A nation destroyed by Falenthia?”

“Ausosa destroyed the capital. With Kru’s army from Zanzfir.” Alfar cried, looking at her girlfriend bleakly, “That’s why Mishia disappeared. They were vulnerable. I was supposed to be leading them. I failed. Like I always fail. Always watch my people burn.”

Malis flinched, looking down, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“When Mishia fell, that’s when we found him. The golden casket, beneath the lake. When they called my home East Falenth. He was the first Sin I met.” Alfar smiled weakly, “The Goblin King.”

Malis looked up, “You... Met him? Already? Do you have your time right?”

“I do.” Alfar said, putting her arms around Malis, and holding her. “Mishia welcomed everyone. Everyone didn’t welcome Mishia. Goblins don’t like cities. They like their own. Because of him. Because goblins are supposed to be with the king. You are.”

Malis winced, “What? You said that we should be able to be together.”

Alfar nodded, “Yes. With his permission. His understanding. His belief defines what a goblin is and should be. You’re all made in his image. As disturbing as that might be.”

Malis screwed up her face, “You asked someone permission to date me?”

Alfar sighed, “I know you hate it. It is more than that. They should have come for you, your family. The pack outside the city. They didn’t, because the King said, a hundred years ago, that you had permission to choose. To choose humanity or goblin. Because it shouldn’t matter that you’re both. You should be able to choose... Both.”

Malis sighed heavily, “Oh fuck. Fuck. Fuck! You are the reason. You asked the Goblin King to accept mon... Hybrids. You convinced him. That’s why people like I can even exist.”

“A hundred years ago, the Goblin King grew up.” Alfar smiled tightly, “And yet... Humans still haven’t. They won’t let you be goblin. You have to be human, or dead or beaten.”

Malis touched her cheek gently, “Alfar. I don’t resent them for making me a slave.”

“I do.” The elf snapped, ears flattening against her head. She looked at the woman she loved, angry and tearful eyes. “I resent slavery for existing. Why haven’t we progressed beyond this? Why are they so weak?”

Malis held her, “We have each other. Is that enough?”

Alfar smiled and kissed her, feeling the goblin flaring up inside her girlfriend. She saw her eyes flicker from brown to green. Her arms held her tightly, demanding.

She pulled back, breaking the kiss. Malis growled softly, before her eyes flickered back to brown. Alfar stroked her cheek, “I went and begged a Sin for you. Don’t ever call yourself a mongrel, again.”

Malis smiled at her sadly, “Ok.”

Alfar turned, glaring at the paladin, “Express your xenophobia again, and I will not show mercy.”

Malis cuddled into her, “There is something you could help me with. When you get... Angry. Violent. I... Really like it.”

Alfar grinned at her, “I know. It’s cute.”

“I want to watch you kill someone.” Malis said, frightened, “I don’t like that.”

Alfar nodded and pressed her forehead against her, “You don’t have to. Everyone has things that they don’t like about themselves. We won’t let you lose control. Not ever. We have that sorted.”

Malis nodded, and held her, trying not to cry.

There was enormous ground-shaking thump. Alfar turned, “Done sulking?”

The metal hulk lay down in front of the fireplace, and let out a long and rather loud moan. Telling Alfar just how angry he was with her. For letting another hellhound come anywhere near her. For neglecting him and paying attention to the half-goblin.

Malis smiled and picked a stale biscuit from the jar near the door and tossed it in front of him. “I like her too. Can we share?”

The hellhound glared his eyes of flame towards them both, and then picked up the biscuit and munched it slowly. He was still pouting, that was obvious. Extremely obvious. He wasn’t going to try and hide it. He was jealous of Malis.

She walked over to him and patted his head, “Come on, Garmr.”

The hellhound glared at her like she’d betrayed him. Alfar laughed softly, “Jealousy is not a good look for you. After all, Akheron will need help against your brother.”

Malis

“Alfar, I know Garmr can think and so on, but is he more than a dog?”

The giant metal creature nuzzled her leg, and she looked at him in surprise. He’d understood it. She wasn’t sure how much.

Alfar patted Garmr, giving him another biscuit, “He’s a weapon of mass destruction, Malis. Which means he has to have the skill and intelligence to use time magic as well as I do. Garmr likes me. He likes biscuits. He’s also one of the most powerful mages on the continent. I guess... He’s somewhere between a troll, and an ork. Intelligent, but hampered by the instincts of a dog. He talks. Sometimes. If he likes you. Inside your head.”

Malis grinned and sat down beside him, “Well. You’re going to like me that much one day, Garmr.”

The dog let out a small howl, letting her know he didn’t think that was ever going to be a possibility. However, she could also feel Kao’s approval of the idea. Which probably meant achieving it was a challenge worthy of a god’s approval.

Alfar frowned, looking at the sky, “Problems. Bad problems. I don’t like this. To many people. Twisting and shaking fate. The Nine waking up. The gods playing with us all. Outwitting the Sins is hard enough. Especially the big one.”

Malis looked up at her, “The big one? Wait. You sent the twins to save the others. You didn’t tell them there was going to be a Sin waiting for them!”

“He isn’t.” Alfar smiled tightly, “If I warned them, it’d make sense, and everything that makes sense he sees coming. He’s terrifying like that. Pride. He’s scary.”

Malis sighed heavily, “Pride is the one you’ve been freaking out about, that he’s coming.”

Alfar nodded silently, and she stood up, brushing the Garmr’s oil from her hands onto her dress and stepped over, putting an arm around her waist, “If anyone can outwit Pride on the spot, it is going to be Astarte.”

The elf nodded and kissed her forehead, “I wouldn’t have sent them if I didn’t think they will do it.”

Malis looked at her, “Oh, come on. You don’t see everything. I’ve already heard you admit that. You saying you remember them winning? How often? You can admit when you have hope.”

“Astarte doesn’t die here.” Alfar smiled weakly, and then sighed, “Mikhael does. Sometimes. And we can’t win without him. He protects me. When the fires come. When the fields burn. When you kick Greed in the balls.”

Malis swallowed nervously, “I really hate the idea there is someone out there who can command me. Why can he do it? Why do... My people... Bow down when he talks, really?”

“You were made to serve.” Alfar sighed heavily, sitting down against Garmr and dragging her into her lap.

Malis listened, as Alfar played with her hair, plaiting it idly, anxiously. “All goblins were created, as a race. The warlock who made them wasn’t trying to create the First People, like Drak’tur failed to do with the orks. He wanted an army. An unstoppable army. One that could infinitely replenish its own ranks, hence the... Appetite.”

Malis winced, feeling a mixture of shame, embarrassment and revulsion. “We were made to

be a plague. A plague the warlock could just direct and wipe out his enemies. So we were all born to follow his voice.”

“Yes. Sort of. Not his voice. Magic has rules and constraints.” Alfar said, “When making a race that shakes at the mirror of a voice, you have to use the same race to do it. The Goblin King was the plan. He was the first creation, and made to be perfectly loyal to the warlock.”

Malis frowned, “So why isn’t this warlock in charge of goblin kind?”

“He was assassinated.” Alfar whispered, “By a friend who thought his plan was mad. Is mad. Friend died, too. Upset times. Especially with a swarm of fifty thousand goblins who no longer knew who they were. Needed to make a culture for themselves.”

Malis smiled slowly, “Our king was still loyal, but no one to be loyal to. Everyone was dead.”

Alfar stopped for a moment, “It was worse than that. Those first pillages... The goblins didn’t know. Didn’t know how strong the emotions were. No one like me to hold their hand. I wasn’t born yet. Not allowed to change the past. Bad things happen. Worse than the Sins.”

Malis shuffled into her, “You remember them, don’t you? Even though you weren’t born? That must be disturbing.”

“I remembered them before I was born. That was disturbing, the first time.” Alfar smiled, “Not born. First moment, I woke up. I saw everything. Didn’t know how to breathe yet.”

Malis sighed, “I don’t like that you do that. Other people might think you’re easily distracted. I don’t. You distract them. From talking about things that might hurt.”

“Sorry.” Alfar said and leaned in, kissing her head, “It’s a habit. There’s never been anyone who understands me that well. Alteo, you, Akr, and Hope. Nobody else. Not even my friends, or Garmr. Nobody sees me for me. They see the Sibyll. The prophet. The timeless elf.”

Malis frowned, “Hope. I don’t think I’ve heard you mention her before.”

“Wasn’t the right time. Hope was staying quiet.” Alfar replied, “Sorry. She is a good friend, and a better enemy. Hope and I... We try and kill each other. Both past and future. Lots. Sometimes we need each other. She’s nice then.”

Malis shivered, “Ok. I have to ask... Is Hope on the Sins?”

“No.” Alfar said, her voice hesitating, “But something like them. Something meant to stop them. Something worse than them, sometimes. Sometimes better. No black and white. No goblin or man. Something in between. That’s this world.”

Malis smiled, and grabbed one of her hands, pulling it around her, “Sounds like you. You do what you have to, don’t you, Alfar? Always.”

“I wish I didn’t. But I do.”

Malis sighed, “You’re thinking about our breakup again, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Stop it.” Malis snapped, “I’m not there yet. I’m still head over heels. You know, I’d never thought about having a girlfriend before. Not once. Well, maybe once, for as long as it took for the thought to form. The other girls at the training house weren’t nice. Not a one. Nice got you dead.”

Alfar laughed, “Elfin are different. Boy, girl? Doesn’t matter. Same thing to us. No difference. Always been that way. Well, long time. Even in elfin terms. Different species, on the other hand... Alphege got in trouble for liking Trei. Right up until he became a god. Then people rethought the

rules. A ghou! became a god. Maybe species didn't matter. Mishia was the proof it didn't matter. Some elfin resisted. Eldrasa was always stubborn."

Malis frowned, "So your people were racist?"

"Lots still are. Will be." Alfar sighed, "Which is why I hate it. Can't tolerate it. So long as people find a reason to hate, then hate makes people hurt. Takes things from them."

The paladin on the other side of the room stirred, "You're right about that. I mean... I don't like it. You already know that. But... Not liking it... It hurts me, too. Gives me an excuse to turn anger to hate, and hate burns everything. Burns your own soul."

Malis glared at him and smiled grimly, "Thanks. Now you can go back to shutting up."

The paladin turned back around.

Alfar leaned down, whispering, "You're nice. Not bad."

Malis swallowed nervously. Alfar knew it, and she'd felt it. Felt her hunger to break his bones. It wasn't a desire. Hunger was the only way she could describe the desperate, crawling sensation.

Alfar had warned her that she was waking up. Becoming fully goblin. That this was some kind of coming of age or something. She'd assumed it was only about the things she wanted to do with Alfar... But goblins were more than that. They were violent in other ways.

She didn't like it. It made her feel gross. She didn't like that it felt right to want to tear someone in half.

Goblins were created as a weapon. It was a poor weapon that didn't want to hurt anyone.

Malis bit her lip, fighting the tears. Alfar's arms linked around her, pulling her close, and she felt the elf holding her tightly, refusing to let her go. Alfar didn't say anything. Not a single reassuring word. Nothing to say she knew what Malis was going through.

Malis smiled sadly, "Damn. You're sweet."

Charity

She fought herself as she felt Amayo kissing her neck. It was tempting, extremely tempting, to bed him yet again. He made her feel alive in a way very few people could.

“Stop it. Take a look at the mana flow.”

Amayo shrugged, “So there’s an incoming portal. They’ll take one glance at us and run the other way. Nobody likes walking on someone. Not unless they plan on joining them.”

Charity pouted, “You’re going to make me have to push you away. Aren’t you?”

She bit her lip, suppressing another sound as he bit her gently. She wanted everything he was offering, but she knew better than to risk everything. The person arriving wasn’t a Sin, but they would be the one to summon them.

The presence of the hellhound was intense, now. She could feel it in the air. It wasn’t just playing havoc with the minor weather systems. Water was drifting into the air by itself. Flowers were coming back to life.

Wherever it was coming from, it shouldn’t be. It was breaking rules of magic, rules that she recognised. Whoever summoned the hellhound was summoning it from the past.

Time magic was dangerous at the best of times. Changing the future from the now had ramifications that few mages were prepared for. The creation of exotic types of mana, that could destroy entire cities if not contained.

Changing the past wasn’t nearly as safe. Every time it had happened, then reality had been ruptured. Areas of the realms where every law ceased to exist. Where nightmares hungered for flesh. There were a few places like it. The border between Ozandius and Falenthia was one such place. It had kept the two kingdoms separate, until the fall of Mishia.

Even the gods avoided places like that, and her little island might be about to become one of them, and all Amayo wanted to do was sleep with her. He was being far too single-minded.

And she knew he wasn’t.

She elbowed him in the gut, and walked towards the doorway crossly, “Did Wrath order you to try and distract me? Or is it your own selfish ambition?”

Amayo coughed weakly, unable to speak. She hadn’t been gentle, and he hadn’t expected the blow. He deserved it, either way.

Charity’s eyes widened as she saw a person appear in the largely empty and desolate landscape. She hadn’t seen a shift, or any kind of magical shunt. He’d stepped through and across dimensions like he was walking. He’d moved like the gods moved.

He was also a Fury. The red hair, and scaled tail wrapped around his waist were a dead giveaway. She hadn’t seen another Fury since she’d run away from the Hall of Hells.

She jumped down out of her cubby, and smiled, “If your plan was to summon the hellhound here, far away from anyone, sorry. This is sort of my island.”

He spun on the spot, staring in surprise, “Wait, what? How do you know what I was going to do? Are you a Sin?”

She shook her head, “No. He is though.”

She waved a hand to where Amayo was leaning on the door, still obviously having trouble

breathing from the ribs she'd cracked. She glared at him, "He's a jerk. Anyway. No, I'm not here because of the Sins. Not directly. Alfar made me come here. I was quite content running away from the world."

The Fury glared at her, "You know Alfar. Of course she sent someone. Wouldn't let me do this alone. I figured Astarte could handle Mikhael by herself."

"No idea who that is." Charity shrugged, "Not really sure what Alfar wants me to do, either. We're not on the best of terms. But when she asks you to do something, you don't often have a choice."

The Fury nodded slowly, "True... My name is Akheron. I'm a Fury."

"Noticed." She shrugged, "Guess that means you know what I am."

"No, actually." He shook his head, "I mean, I can guess you're one of the demonraces, but I wasn't born in Hell. I am quite pissed with most of them, but I figure that Hero did his own damage to your kind, as well as mine."

She smiled, "I ran. Ran away from him. That's why I survived the Collapse. My name is Charity. I... Some of my friends fight the Sins. Usually drag me into it. You might have noticed the weather? Its from the hellhound. You're about to call him out of the past. Hoping you'll reconsider. Time is... Difficult."

Akheron frowned, "I wish I could. Charity, who avoided saying what she is. If I don't, then they hurt people. Kill people. All I have is a name. If I say it, then the hellhound finds his own way here. If he submits to me, then the Sins might not kill the people I care about. They are convinced that I'm..."

"The Heir." Charity said with disgust, "Yeah. Like I said. Friends are trying to stop them. I got put in a bottle for a hundred years to wait for you to turn up. Hope wasn't particularly nice about it, and it was boring at times. I don't deal well with boredom. I also don't deal well with world-ending prophecies, like the ones about you and your sister."

Akheron winced, "My sister?"

"It's called the Hellbound Prophecy." Charity shrugged, "Twins who were triplets. Furies. When your sister dies, and you become king, you destroy the world. Remake it into the hell that you weren't born into. Let me assure you, as an infernal, the realms are better off without it."

He flinched, "Fuck. The humans gave us a nickname. The Hellbound Twins. I was always thought it sounded weird."

Charity smiled tightly, "Destiny is a dick. So is Daitis and the other Fates. But, Akheron, you don't actually have to go through with this. You could fight the Sins instead. Or... You know, choose neither?"

He looked at her in confusion, and then up to the Sin standing in the doorway, "You said he was a Sin."

Charity blushed, "Lust. And eh... Well earned name."

Akheron laughed awkwardly, "I thought you said your friends fought the Sins?"

"I wanted to try something else." Charity replied, and smiled up at him, "And as much as a jerk he is, I'm not about to dump him. I do still like him. But he is still a Sin. Divided loyalties. Not like I expected it to be smooth sailing between us. He believes you becoming king is the right thing to do."

Akheron clenched his fists, "Charity... I do want to be their king, in a lot of ways. With their power backing me, I could do a lot of good in the world. I've been running from what I can do since I was a kid. Trying to fit in to this world... A world that's just so... Fragile."

Charity shrugged, "Sure. And the Sins are trying to save the world, too. They think the only way to undo the Calamity is to remake the world, and the only power short of a god capable of doing so is infernal."

Akheron glared at her, "You think I approve of their methods?"

"No." Charity sighed heavily, "But... If It helps understand my perspective... I'm a djinn, Akheron."

He took a nervous step back from her, "Ah. You understand the danger of good intentions, I guess."

"My magic is about as safe to use as the Sins are." She insisted, "Don't try and use them. No matter what they offer."

She flinched as she felt delicate and strong fingers around her throat, and she heard Amayo yell out, "Don't! If you hurt her, Rsja, I'll kill you!"

Akheron glared at the elfin figure holding her, ready to snap her neck, "Rsja. If you threaten to kill every girl I have a conversation with, we're going to have a problem."

The elf released her, and Charity breathed a sigh of relief.

Rsja walked in front of her, glaring, "I am the Envy, little djinn. You understand what that means, correct?"

Charity smiled tightly, "Hope appointed me in the hopes that I could be your opposite."

"Born to be my enemy." The elf replied, and looked over at Akheron, her face taking on a shape of awe, "She is not just a girl. I didn't hurt Alfar, or Astarte. But I can't let this one be the same. She was appointed to kill me, Lord Akheron."

The Fury shrugged, "And? You don't get to kill her. Rsja."

Charity grinned at the elf's little shiver. It was a feeling she knew well. But one she expected that Wrath would be rather upset to learn about.

Amayo put a hand on her, "Stop. None of us are fighting right now, we're talking. So please, don't be thinking of ways to divide the Sins."

Charity glared at him, "Really? Right after you tried to distract me from Akheron's arrival? Give me a break."

Amayo sighed, "Sorry. But we are talking."

"Enough talk!" Akheron snapped, "I am so sick of everyone trying to manipulate me, trying to control me! I don't want to be king. I don't want the Sins in my life, and I don't want whoever your fucking friends are, djinn. I want all of you to leave me alone!"

Charity shrugged, and turned, walking back towards her cubby on stilts. She heard his surprise, but didn't stop, leaping up it easily, and landing softly.

The Fury appeared in front of her, like he'd appeared from somewhere else in the world, glaring, "That's it? You're just walking away?"

Charity shrugged, "I'm supposed to stop you being king. If you don't want it, I don't give a

shit anymore. I'd much rather make out with Amayo again. Though, I'm pretty sure he's angry with me, too. Eugh. We'll have to have some sit down and talk out your feelings thing."

Akheron smiled weakly, "For someone who doesn't like Alfar, you remind me of her. The simple way you see the world. I wish I could see it that way."

"You will." She sighed heavily, "It comes with age, Akheron. You're a Fury. One day, you'll be as old as I am now. When you get there... Nothing will feel urgent, ever again. I know the world is better off without my magic. Even had a god reprimand me for forgetting that, recently."

Akheron frowned, "A god?"

"I made a people. A new race." She swallowed, "Didn't really mean to, but it happened. So Trei... Took them away. I didn't want him to. But he did it. After telling me what an idiot I was."

Akheron leaned against the doorway, "I miss him. He had a way of making things clear."

Charity frowned, "Then make them clear, Akheron. You're the only one making things complex. Do you want to be king, or not? That's the only choice. Stop making it about the future and about fragile people. They're not your responsibility, not alone. They make their own choices too. Alfar can take care of them."

Akheron sighed, "What if I don't know the answer to that question, yet?"

Charity frowned, "Then I guess you'll be summoning a hellhound."

Temperance

She was right that Mercy was a prisoner, if not quite right about exactly how the old mage had been contained. She wasn't bound, not by magic. She was bound by circumstances.

Twelve ships, moving at sea, with a cage suspended between them. If any of the twelve slacked off, the entire cage dropped below the surface. It had, frequently. Keeping the mage in a semi-drowned state.

The ships were also taking great pains to travel over deep water, to keep the cage over the deep water.

Temperance had no doubt that any attack would plummet the prisoner into the sea, where she would finish drowning, and die in minutes. It was admirable, but Mercy was only still a prisoner because she didn't know where she was, kept away from any visible land mass.

The frostwurm dropped like a stone, falling down and through one of the ships, before freezing the rest, and the cage, in place with a single breath. She shot up and through it with a flick of her tail.

Firebolts and lightning shot through the air with the stink of burning magic. She guided them around her easily, and looked to the cage. It hadn't moved. Not a single sign.

Temperance rolled her eyes, and then shot through the air, and another ship, with a flap of her wings. She heard the screams a moment before the rending of the wood drowned them out.

She landed on the ice easily, her claws easily finding grip on the smooth surface. She skidded to a stop, spinning to face the defenders of the ships again.

There weren't any.

She walked over slowly, wincing at the scent and smell of the burning bodies. All the burning bodies. She glanced at the cage, still silent. No signs of the prisoner yet escaping.

She tapped a foot on the ice, "Come on, Mercy. No one else would have put them out of their misery so effectively."

A voice spoke in her mind, "True. Why are you here, Tempi? I didn't call for you."

"We're awake. We're all awake. The Sins have found the heir."

The voice was surprised, "That wasn't supposed to happen for another nine hundred years. Something has changed the course of history. Are you aware of what it might be?"

Temperance shrugged, "No idea. Now are you going to sulk in the cage, all day?"

The cube of various metals drifted apart smoothly, and a drenched figure emerged from it stepping onto the ice gently. She showed no emotion, but Temperance could smell her feet burning from the cold.

The mage laid out the remnants of her cage, reassembling them into a ship of metal, and stepped onto it. She sat down, and looked over at her pointedly.

Temperance crossed and sat in the boat, smiling at her, "I didn't think I was going to miss those violet eyes of yours, but I did."

Mercy smiled tightly, "You caused me to kill some people that were dear to me. Please, can we save the joyous reunion until later?"

"Not really." Temperance turned, spreading her wings as she melted the ice around them,

“There is a fleet of twenty four my vessels about to attack a city I promised to defend. I expect an army has already attacked them.”

Mercy smiled, “Then let us go save your friends, Tempi.”

She flicked her wings, and the metallic boat shot through the waters. It wasn't quite as fast as she could be, but as was faster than soaring. She could feel Mercy navigating at the back, deftly guiding them around the swirls and eddies of the vast ocean.

“Have you kept up on the world, from your prison?”

Mercy replied simply, “Of course. The world is on the verge of war. Zanfir and Falenthia, guided towards this folly, by the ones who call themselves the Hunter's Guild. Adventurers with purpose. Warrants allow the capture of wanted individuals and dangerous creatures. A cabal of mages, the Federated Darkness, assist them towards these goals by providing intelligence in exchange for being given access to questionable materials.”

“Wrath founded the Hunters' Guild.” Temperance replied.

Mercy's voice was as irritating as ever. “Of course, it was the most logical route for manipulating large empires available to him whilst he wished to remain in the shadows. That time will be ending. Ah. The attack on this city you so like. It is the beginning of war between the two empires.”

Temperance increased her speed. It had taken her almost a full day to find where Mercy had been held. She didn't want to think of what was happening to her home.

“I am sorry.” Mercy whispered, “I should have been aware that you were awake, and sought you out.”

“Nidoghr found me. Kept me honest.”

She could feel Mercy's pity. She didn't enjoy it. It was one emotion she hated. Pity was something that lesser creatures deserved. Not her. Not one of the most powerful wyrms to have ever lived.

“He felt you awake, and I did not?” Mercy asked uncertainly, “That makes little sense to me. It should not be possible.”

“Wrath has been manipulating Ni.” Temperance sighed, “Trying to get him to agree to be no part of this war. He succeeded. I may have encouraged Ni to take that path as well. I don't do so well when he's around.”

Mercy leaned forward onto her knees, rocking the boat. Temperance could feel the intensity of her thoughts. This was one of her least favourite parts of the mage. Not that she had many favourite parts.

“I've sent out feelers. There are two places where the Sins are concentrated enough to be detectable.” Mercy said slowly, “An island, far away from... Anything. And a city, in Falenthia. Adairoft.”

“It's close to the place I'm protecting.” Temperance replied, “We save Rhara Bag, then you and I can go to Adairoft, via Kabad. The capital can't be allowed to fall, either.”

“Falenthia is already lost.” Mercy replied calmly, “Or at least this part of the empire. Kabad is on fire. The castle is nothing but ash... Ah. I can see Pride's footprints. He... Is in Adairoft, now.”

Temperance swallowed nervously, “Kabad has already fallen? How many people are going to

die, Mercy?”

“If we don’t succeed, all of them.” The mage replied, the hurt audible in her voice. Though she was often cold, and distant, Mercy hated death. Hated killing. It was why she was so annoyed at Temperance. That the most merciful thing she could do before was to kill everyone instantly.

Temperance guided the craft, seeing land on the horizon. There was an orange glow, and it wasn’t the sunset. It was the sunlight striking the smoke, from her city burning.

“It’s too late.” The wyrm said softly, angrily.

Mercy braced herself, standing, “No. Not yet. Take flight, frostwyrms. I will join you in a moment. We will end this battle, and we will end this war. Do what must be done.”

Temperance let loose a roar as she shot into the sky, spinning before spreading her wings and screaming into the wind again. She knew humans remembered how to fear her kind.

She had returned to her city.

Astarte

She barely had time to think how much she hated her brother before an orkish fist crashed into her face, and sent her sprawling.

She shook her head, holding up a hand and stood up slowly, “You know, before you take a girl out on a date, you should ask her name.”

“Astarte.” The ork said before the ground beneath her exploded upwards, grabbing her and yanking her down into it. She could feel the pressure increasing, beginning to boil her blood. It was extremely uncomfortable.

Her hair began to squeal, and her tail thrash, and as she was dragged deeper. Not deep enough, not yet. She had to let the ork think he could win. She might not be as skilled as her brother, but she knew enough.

The heat below her was increasing rapidly, and she could feel the force around her slowly increasing, minutely increasing as she crossed through the layers of earth, moving towards the core.

She felt the magic release her, and felt the weight of the rubble trying to crush her. Speaking was impossible at this depth, as was moving, but she wasn't as frail as most species.

The thought exploded brightly in her mind.

Ex'pa.

Astarte shot back out of the ground in a burst of rock and ash, rolling as her skin and scales smoked, and she grinned up at the ork as bright red liquid bubbled up beside her.

She could feel the ground beginning to shake. Usually the process would take weeks, but she'd accelerated it. The ork was correct, he was physically much stronger than she was.

He smiled at her, “Curious. Unexpected. Goodbye.”

He vanished, and Astarte growled in frustration as she saw his molecules ripped apart. Splitting. The most painful way of travelling with magic, but also untraceable.

She turned and grabbed the two broken warriors who were still alive from the ground, “Let's go.”

She stepped outside, dragging the two out of the ruins of the tower, and looked up at the wall and groaned, “Oh, kregstad. Na'k nor ra'ama!”

Mabeline coughed weakly, “In Common?”

“We're fucked.” Mikhael translated. It was a guess, but it wasn't far off from the Wyrddin. Lacking some of the gravity, perhaps.

Astarte winced, “You two, back to Alfar's. You don't have what it takes for this fight. The Sins have decided to eradicate us.”

Mikhael laughed, coughing up blood, “Get stuffed, Fury. I plan to defend my home.”

Mabeline let get of her, rolling her shoulders. She picked up a bow from a fallen shoulder and gave the bowstring a test pull. “That goes for both of us, Astarte. Go get Alfar. We'll need her help, too.”

Astarte rolled her eyes, “Ex'pa!”

The explosion was pitiful next to her brother's, but it cleared a group of swarming goblins off the top of the wall. Buying the two some time.

She turned and sprinted through the walls of reality, appearing outside Alfar's shop instantly. She could see the other wall in the distance, already overwhelmed. It was too late to evacuate the city.

She went to open the door, and found Alfar stepping out of it, belting a sword around her waist. The elf was arguing with Malis behind her, who was carrying a warhammer as large as her in a single hand.

She frowned, "How do we win this, Alfar?"

"We don't." The elf replied, "We fight. Get to the fields. Your volcanic eruption will clear them out. We survive until then, and then we survive instead of choking to death."

Astarte reappeared in the fields, sword in hand. It moved cleanly and quickly through the swarming goblins, causing them scream as she sprayed their acidic blood into the air.

The sword went flying as an axe crashed through her arm, shattering the bone. She fell down, screaming.

The weapon she'd stolen earlier came to hand, and she fired the plasma burst, scorching the air. The goblin that had hit her knocked it aside easily, as if it weren't almost pure energy that could burn through almost anything.

He stood over her, axe draped across one shoulder and grinned, "You don't know who I am, do you, Fury?"

She held her arm, glaring and trying not to hiss. "A goblin."

"A Sin." He corrected, grinning at her, "I am Gherijai the Greed. I am the Goblin King, the First of my kind. I am also extremely disappointed at how easy it is to attack you. I hope the king is stronger."

"Na'ka rail!" She shouted, and the Sin winced, dusting himself down as steam emerged from his skin.

He nodded slowly, "Impressive use of magic. Trying to invert my skin to burn me. Creative, if a tad desperate. Unfortunately, I am a very powerful shaman, and my spirit has watched over me since before you were born. He isn't about to let you kill me. I provide him with too much fun."

She launched to her feet, claw sidesweeping through the haft of the axe. Or that was her intention. She'd never encountered a metal she couldn't tear apart, until now. He slammed the bottom of the haft into her stomach, and then used it throw her head into his rising knee.

She fell to the ground, coughing and wheezing. She couldn't be crushed by being buried alive, and this goblin was stronger than she was. Whatever celestial was backing him had turned him into something else altogether.

She glared up at him, and he smiled, crouching in front of her, "I must admit, you are cute. Lying there, unable to fight back. If Wrath wouldn't get so pissed at me, I'd see if I could fuck you to death. But Wrath was clear. None of that today. No distractions. So I guess, now I've had my entertainment, I'll just kill you."

She waited for the axe to come crashing down towards her neck, and then spun. She used her tail to grab the axe, and use the momentum to crash a foot into the goblin's neck.

He hit the ground as she turned and ripped through the air, trying to portal away.

She felt an angry clawed hand grab her and wrench her backwards from the portal. A fist

broke one of her fangs, causing her to choke on it. Then a foot landed on her throat, and she glared upwards, unbreathing.

Suffocating a Fury was notoriously difficult.

The self-proclaimed Goblin King reached down and Astarte screamed as he tore her ears from her head. The pain was overwhelming. It didn't stop, didn't lessen. The pain ripped through her, adding her brain.

The goblin flipped her over, and she felt the crack as the bones in her tail shattered, and another burst of overwhelming pain as the dagger cut it in half. The bloody remnants of her tail landed in front of her face, tossing and turning as the nerves died, and the muscles flailed helplessly.

The knife pierced her spine, paralysing her, but not cutting the pain off. He was precise, experienced. She was not the first Fury he had killed.

She was dead. He was playing with her. Right now, she only survived because she had something he wanted. She couldn't think of a way out of this. She was outmatched, and the only way to escape would be splitting, but with the pain burning through her brain, she couldn't concentrate enough for the spell.

He rolled her over.

She could see the drool falling from his jaw as he grinned at her, and then his knife expertly carved through her flesh again. If she could still breathe, she would have screamed, as he took what made her able to be a mother, mutilating her. Then his knife went lower, and took away what made her female.

Then he vanished in a blur of angry green, and Astarte stared through terrified and blurred eyes at the woman standing in front of her. Malis' skin was flickering between green and black.

Astarte's eyes rolled back in her head.

Mikhael

His face hit the dirt as an explosion rocked the ground again, and then a hand held him down. He glared beside him, blinking in surprise as he saw her elfin face.

The fields around them were burning. People were dying. All he could think of was Alfar saying that this was what had made them friends.

She held a finger to her lips and then glared nearby. There were plenty of goblins running by, but they didn't seem to be noticing them, but there was something else as well.

The ork. The one who had been so sure he was going to kill him, and kill them all. An ork that had been completely overwhelmed the moment Alfar had done something he hadn't expected, sending in Astarte, alone.

Alfar touched the sword by her side gently, and Mikhael found himself staring into her dark blue eyes. He didn't see the usual sparkle there. This wasn't the elf who danced and laughed and made tea. This was a warrior.

The ork bellowed angrily, "I know you're here, part elf! I can taste you in the air! Did you think you survived because of the Fury? You are my prey, and you will taste death, by my hand!"

Alfar nodded grimly to him.

Mikhael stood up slowly, and drew his sword with exaggerated slowness, "Hiding? I've been waiting for you, ork. I thought there was no possible way for me to overwhelm you. You're not as clever as you make out. I shouldn't be surprised, after all, you're just an ork."

The ork faced him, and snorted, "Foolish. Even if the elf with you assists, you will not survive. You're mortal. Not enough elfin blood. You will die. She can't protect you all the time."

Alfar appeared behind him silently, her blade sliding through the ork's neck cleanly, elegantly.

Mikhael rushed forward, and felt his sword shatter as the ork punched towards him. He dropped it and dropped to the ground, passing under the hunk of flesh that he hadn't even cut.

An orkish elbow slammed into Alfar, knocking her backwards. Unlike Mikhael, she used the momentum to flip lightly, landing perfectly, and at the ready. Not a single hair out of place.

This was a full blooded elf. The grace of the gods expressed in the perfection of such a lightweight creature. It had been a long time since Mikhael had seen anything like it. He'd avoided his own when he became an adventurer.

He didn't have a chance to stand in awe. The ork ignored her and went for him, fists pounded across the earth as it charged into him at full pace, attempting to gore him with its tusks. Mikhael barely managed to leap to the side in time, as the ork grabbed the ground, circling around with a flying kick that audibly cracked every rib in his side.

Mikhael hit the ground rolling, gasping.

Alfar didn't miss a beat, her sword cutting through the back of one of the ork's ankles, severing the tendon. Unfortunately it seemed that was exactly what he wanted her to do, using it to grab her.

The ork held both her shoulders and repeatedly slammed his head into hers. Each time there was a cracking sound, and a spray of blood into the air. Mikhael couldn't help. He could barely even breathe.

Alfar suddenly slammed her head into the ork's, and sent it tumbling. She landed lightly and rubbed her head, "Ow. That hurt."

The ork reeled, launching to his feet, and Mikhael gasped in horror as the combined fists came crushing down on top, crushing the elf into the ground with a gruesome crunch and splat of blood in every direction.

The ork let out an uncharacteristic squeal, falling backwards, a sword protruding out his mouth, from below his jaw.

The elf stood up slowly, as if she were dizzy, and held her head, "You're mean. I don't like it when you're mean. I get hurt a lot. Not enough."

The ork dragged the sword out painfully, using two fingers and tossed it aside. He glared at her, "How do you still breathe, elf?"

"You're wrong about me." She smiled, and Mikhael felt a chill run down his spine. It wasn't a smile he'd seen her make before. There was kindness, no empathy. It was the smile of someone who knew they had their prey.

The ork snorted, "Am I?"

"I am not timeless, nor am I truly eternal, life most elfin." Alfar replied, "I will happily tell you what I am. How I was born. I am fixed. I am a fixed point in time and space and magic and reality."

"That's not... Possible." The ork said slowly, as if he were insulted that anything could exist outside his range of experience."

"Eternity has passed me by. Passes me by, every single moment." Alfar grinned, "I know your death, ork. I have watched it many times. Lived it. You have never lived mine, nor shall you."

Mikhael wished he was brave enough to attack the ork, but he wasn't. He wasn't even brave enough to overcome the pain stabbing him in the gut.

Akheron

Charity was sitting on the edge of her strange little house, quietly singing a song whilst ignoring the Fae sitting beside her, desperate to try and cheer her up, to get forgiveness for whatever he had done.

Akheron recognised the song. It was one that he had heard Aurili sing once before, at Antoinette's funeral. It was depressing, and old. Yet, the version Charity was singing was even older.

He found himself singing along, translating it.

"I left my love far behind, *Egō laiwos mauros kāmī dhēnom*,
as I rove to the rising sun, *mōlis probhwājō toqe kenō sāwel*,
war in my stead, shield in my hand, *dsā en egō skotos, rebhō en egō ghestos*,
death by the door ahead, *chentis nedjos dhworis new djnōs*."

He paused at the end of the song, feeling like he'd lost something. Like he was lost, all over again. He had left behind the first woman he had ever felt something for, the first one he could see himself with.

Left her behind to court war, and the death of all things.

Charity looked at him, and spoke quietly, "That's a verse from the Hellbound Prophecy, Akheron. You know it?"

"A memory of it." He replied, sighing. He was too far into this. Too far gone. It was time to do what he had come to do.

"Cerbho."

The sky split open as the enormous hulking creature crashed through it, striking the ground in front of him. The metal was glowing orange from heat, and the eyes in the sculpted face were aflame.

It stood up slowly, shaking, and Akheron slowly realised that beside this one, Garmr was just a pup. Cerbho towered over Akheron. He was barely tall enough to reach up and touch its knee.

The hellhound glared at him, only for a moment, before it attacked.

The island disappeared almost instantly, within the first moment of the attack, as the hellhound struck him with a force he'd never experienced. Akheron held the angry jaws open, sweating as he fought to hold it off. He didn't have the energy to spare to think how he was still standing when the ground was gone.

Akheron glared at the hellhound, as it slowly began to close its jaws. He could fight it, but he was losing. The creature was beyond his strength, angry, and proving its brute strength.

If the magic was anything like Garmr's, it was toying with him, playing with its food. He had to take advantage of that, right now.

Akheron's eyes blazed to life, and he felt the mana swarm around him. He could feel the flow of the lifestream being pulled away from everything around him, including the hellhound itself.

"Ex'pa!" He shouted, those familiar words, casting something that might have once begun as simple fire magic. Something he had worked on, teaching himself for years. Mastered.

The air within the hellhound vibrated for a moment so fast it could hardly be said to have happened at all, rapidly increasing the volume of the air, and releasing the energy stored within it.

Temperatures soared, and the outer edges of the expanding gas burst into flames.

Akheron was knocked backwards, falling into the water, as he saw the hellhound disappear, almost instantly. Ruptured and twisted black metal flying in every direction. Tiny gears shot passed him into the water, faster than any living thing could avoid.

He let the water take him, protect him from the debris. Allowing the metal to strike the water and damage itself, rather than becoming something that could hurt him.

Akheron waited for a moment, and then unravelled his tail and shot towards the surface, his head bursting out of the waves that were still shaking the area.

He saw the elf nearby, and the strange house of the djinn. Four small pieces of land, spared from the ravages of the insane attack. Protected to protect them.

The Fae waved a hand, and Akheron relaxes as the ground beneath him rose, as Lust reconstructed the island that had been lost.

Akheron glared at the two Sins, "He didn't bow. Does that count?"

Rsja smiled at him tearfully, and then fell to her knees, bowing her head down to the sand, "I swear, on my elfin blood, by all the power within me, that I will live, and will serve, you, Lord Akheron."

He sighed heavily, walking over the wet sand to her, and picked her up off the ground. He smiled and brushed the sand from her forehead, "Rsja. You're sweet, but this was a test. Did I pass?"

She smiled at him, a tear running down one cheek, "Beyond expectation. You have passed two of the three tests, confirming that you are the rightful heir."

He frowned, "So why swear it? I might not pass the last test."

The Fae landed softly, and shrugged, "That one is easy, Lord Akheron. Ridiculously easy. It's just a formality. As such, I offer you my own allegiance. All you have to do is ask."

Charity stood up, glaring at the three of them, and Akheron could feel the swirl of mana growing around the djinn. She was furious, about to lose control of her not inconsiderable magic.

"Akheron. Don't take this lightly, what they're about to say. Don't toss out an answer, one way or the other." Charity winced, "Tell him the final test."

Rsja hesitated, as if she were suddenly afraid to touch him, and took his hand. She smiled up at him, in adoration, awe, and terror. When had she learned to be scared of him?

"Lord Akheron, the final test is this. Do you accept the Crown of Fangs? Will you be our king, and the King of the Hells?"

Akheron felt a shot of terror travel down his own spine. He had thought he'd have to keep fighting, or at least have the space to discuss this with his sister. She was dealing with something else, scared and hurt and angry. The emotions of battle.

He frowned, looking down.

Whatever he said, things would never be the same. If he accepted the crown, then he would become a conquering king, whether or not he wanted to be. If he rejected it, then the Sins would kill him. He might be able to fight them, but he wouldn't be able to protect the people he cared about.

Alfar

She fought the ork, sword moving across his hardened skin fluidly at every attack, but she also knew that the battle was more even than it appeared to be. Whilst she could remember much of what he would do, and she could do, he could predict it also.

He accounted for every possibility, and she was limited by what was possible. He was not simply a strong and hulking warrior. He was a mage. He had yet to use his magic against her, simply because he already understood that she would be able to resist it, to shift it or dismantle it. So he didn't even try.

Of all the timelines, in all the realms, there were few were victory for either of them was assured. Yet, the fields burned. Mikhael lay on the ground, barely moving, in a much worse state than he realised. One of his ribs had punctured his lungs. He was drowning, and did not yet know it.

There was a limit to how long this could go on for. The city would be lost, soon. Next. A victory here for the Sins could not be allowed, even though victory was already theirs.

She couldn't afford to be distracted. To remember what happens next. It was too painful. Made her remember hurt that she wished had never happened to her at all.

She had to stop Molpa the Pride, here and now. He didn't have an eternal soul. Unlike most orks, he was not long lived. When he died, he would die. He already knew she could recover from almost anything, but she had a disturbing feeling he also knew what she would not be able to recover from.

Alfar danced to the side easily, her dress spinning as the fist crossed the air, and her blade sliced up the length of his arm, revealing muscle and sinew. Revealing the tendon that was her next target.

The skin closed up again behind the sword, and she moved backwards, out of his range, as the ork attacked. This time, a warhammer appearing in his grasp, constructing as it moved towards her.

Alfar bent on her ankles, easily avoiding it whilst cutting open his wrist. The hammer went flying, before the wrist could heal again, but another had already formed in the other hand, striking the ground as she danced across the air, stepping on it as if it were solid, before planting the heel of her foot into one of his eyes.

They were too evenly matched.

She could remember this rising feeling of desperation, remember what choice she would make. She couldn't remember if it was the right one to make or not. She was too afraid of what might happen.

She had to take the chance.

The elf landed easily on the hammer at the next strike, running up the length of the haft towards the ork, sword stabbing towards his other eye.

He grabbed towards her, and she shifted, allowing herself to become different than the rest of reality, to let the tiny things that made her dance to a new sound, a different sound. His fist passed through her easily, as her own passed through his chest.

She smiled grimly and fell back into the flow of things.

Her hand seized his Fel-encrusted heart, tearing the sickening object from his chest instantly. At that same moment, his wrist became solid within her own stomach, with devastating consequences.

As the ork began to gasp, clutching at the hole where his heart had been, Alfar tumbled to the ground, glaring up at what the ork held in his other hand. A piece of her, a fragment.

A fragment that had always been with her, since the moment she was first conceived. A piece of eternity, the original eternity. A piece of the original moment that's collapse lead to the creation of Kao. A piece from before reality had ever existed.

It was what had made her, her.

Alfar's eyes fluttered as she looked at the sky, unable to move. Breathing was a bad idea. She could remember that. She could also remember the feeling creeping up on her. A faintness, a darkness closing in around her.

She was bleeding out, though that was an incredible understatement. Her intestines were resting on the dirt as well.

She smiled weakly as his face came into view, at his hair. It wasn't the dirty blonde he tried to pretend it was, not anymore. It was golden, and his light blue eyes were filled with tears.

Mikhael's hand touched her already-numb cheeks, holding her face weakly, "Don't. We need you Alfar. Don't you dare die on me... Please..."

She smiled up at him sadly, coughing as she tried to speak, "I... Told... You... We would... Be... Friends..."

Mikhael's face was marred by crystalline tears as he leaned in over her, touching his forehead to hers, "We need you, Alfar. Please."

She couldn't talk anymore. She could feel death reaching out for her, trying to claim what it had before been able to touch. She could feel him calling to her, letting her know her work was done.

Trei, that brilliant asshole. God of the Dead. He'd become it so he could keep hope in the world, preserve it. Except now the only hope lay with the woman named for it.

Without Hope, the Sins would now succeed.

Alfar's eyes closed, and a tear ran down her own cheek.

Malis

She felt overwhelming rage, just like Alfar had tried to warn her. She wanted to not just kill the creature in front of her, she wanted to destroy it. To hear it beg for the mercy that it never had. She wanted to hurt it, in the same way she'd seen it hurt Astarte.

The anger buried her own self-revulsion, grinding it down to a small speck deep within her, where it could fester, like it always had.

Her warhammer felt light in her hands as she attacked it, screaming over and over again. The weapon struck against him, blocked easily every time. He was faster than her, stronger than her, but he didn't fight back.

Why wouldn't he fight back?

The goblin grabbed her warhammer, glaring into her eyes, "Kneel."

Malis screamed in pain as she fell onto her hands and knees, her brain feeling like it had short-circuited and ignited every nerve that she had. It almost felt like something else was burning.

It was him.

The Goblin King.

She had to do what he said. This was just like the bracelet. She had to obey him, she was a slave to his will, and this time there was no Fury to protect her, no hero to come and save her.

She was just his toy, and that's all she would ever be, even if she ran away, even if she escaped, then she belonged to this monster.

She could remember the whips of the training house, the fists of the man who taught her to comply. Who taught her that pain was a relief, that it was the only taste of freedom that she would ever have.

She was less than human. She had never been meant for more than that. That was a dream that was now gone. Now she was awake. She was a tool, made to be used by those that were better than her, which included everyone.

Frightened tears ran down her cheeks, as she tried desperately to hold onto the dream. She could remember Alfar. Her smile as she looked at her. The warmth of her arms around her.

She remembered Alfar dancing happily, moving gracefully around the room as she prepared tea. A simple luxury that anyone could afford.

The king stood over her, "I'm surprised that you've lived alone as long as you have. Being a slave is not so bad a future for one of our kind, little creature. But you are mine, and you will join our ranks. Stand behind me."

Her limbs moved of her own accord. She couldn't fight it. She couldn't even think to attack him. Every time she tried to grasp her anger towards him, the thought died before she could finish it. He was remaking her. Forcing her to become just another goblin about to swarm over the walls, and do unspeakable things to the frightened people inside.

Something hit her from behind, knocking her to the ground.

Malis blinked in surprise as her warhammer landed in front of her, drenched in saliva. She reached out for it weakly, fingers recoiling rather than touching it. She growled and slammed her arm in its direction.

The moment she touched the hammer, touched the sickly coating, she felt herself again. She picked up the weapon, standing shakily, and she swung towards him.

The king deflected the blow, spinning around in surprise. He went to say something when the hellhound hit him at full force, driving him into the ground. The creature pounced on the goblin's chest, knocking the air out of him, as well as cracking every bone.

The hellhound turned his head towards her, and Malis heard an ancient voice like grinding gravel inside her skull.

“Kill.”

Charity

She felt something snap in Akheron.

She might not be able to hear thoughts as clearly as Amayo, but when the heart of the Fury broke, the entire world resonated with his pain.

Akheron turned slowly, a hand wrapping around the elf's throat, picking her off the ground as she struggled soundlessly, pointlessly. "You attacked the city. You promised that you wouldn't."

Amayo's magic surged and Faen power moved towards Akheron. She winced and diverted it, appearing between them instantly, disintegrating his magic like it had never been cast, in a way that only a djinn could.

He growled at her, flashing his fangs, "Step aside, Charity. He has rejected the crown. He has to die."

Rsja spoke as well, somewhere further away. "Lord Akheron, you have my loyalty, but so does Wrath. If you stand against the Sins, I will have to hurt you. To break you down and take you prisoner."

The Fury just roared his pain, and a heatwave struck Charity. She punched forward, through the wall of magic that her boyfriend raised, punching him in the throat.

Charity grabbed his shoulders, and headbutted him as hard as she could. She could feel the crack as the Faen skull struck the djinn one. Harder than his. She couldn't let him speak. Couldn't afford to hear his promises.

She could feel the ground shaking from Akheron's desperate attacks. From his explosion magic, employed time and time again. Magic that should drain a person dry, and yet he was still casting.

Charity's eyes went wide and she flung herself to the side, a silk grabbing Amayo by the throat and dragging him after her as metal flew passed. Hundreds of pieces of metal.

The hellhound was reassembling itself.

They couldn't fight three Sins at once, not on even terms. They couldn't survive this, the only way out was to do something she knew would backfire on them, almost immediately.

Amayo's fist hit her stomach, dropping her to her knees. His knee met her face, knocking her into the air in a soft arc that landed her on her back. He stood over her and stomped down, crushing her pelvic bone with an air-shattering scream of pain.

Charity grabbed his ankle and broke it, the bone piercing the flesh and exposing the nerves to the air. She shoved away from him, fighting back the tears that would blind her.

"I wish Aldene was here."

Amayo's eyes widened only for a moment before the spear pierced his chest. He broke the blade off, tossing himself backwards, away from the Valrkjosa.

Aldene didn't say anything, she didn't have to. She knew what was at stake, and would see it done. She turned to face the hellhound, and shot towards it like the fearless warrior that she was.

Charity faced her boyfriend. Well, what she wanted to be her boyfriend, until he betrayed her. Again. Amayo could never be what she wanted him to be. He put his loyalty to a man who had tortured him for a hundred years over the woman he was tortured for caring about.

She attacked him, biting her lip, and trying not burst into tears. She couldn't let her vision

get clouded. She hesitated, but he didn't. The silks around her moved fluidly, grabbing his wrist as he tried to punch, twisting him away in time for her to attack, which he counted, instantly and immediately.

She wasn't his equal.

Charity grabbed his face, and kissed him gently, the tears finally running down her face as she circled the both of them in the pink silks. She held him, crying into his chest, "You idiot."

Amayo sighed, "I'm a Sin, Charity. Akheron has betrayed the crown. He has to die. I don't have a choice."

"Then neither do I." She said, looking up at him, "All you do is hurt me, isn't it? You can't see passed what you are."

"I swore a vow." Amayo growled, "This world had to move on, has to survive. This is the only way to do it. If Akheron still lives, then there are two candidates for the crown, as long as that happens, the world won't survive."

Charity brushed his cheek gently, "I loved you, asshole. I really did. Now... I wish you were dead."

Amayo screamed as he died.

Charity turned away, crying openly. She knew she was still in danger, but it didn't matter. Not right now. She needed this moment, for herself.

She heard Rsja cry out in anger, screaming a pain that Charity felt in her heart. The pain of loss.

Then she heard the elfin neck break.

Akheron's hand touched her shoulder gently, and she shook him off, looking over to the woman she had summoned, and saw the warrior standing over a closing rift.

Aldene turned to the both of them, "I could not destroy it. I have trapped it, for a time. Charity, we will need Oleta's knowledge to destroy him. Do you know where she can be found?"

Akheron held up a hand, "Give her a moment. She just killed her boyfriend."

"As she knew she would have to." The Valrkjosa replied testily, "We are the Nine, Fury. No relationship with a Sin can last forever."

"He's dead, but not gone." Charity sighed, shaking weakly, looking up at the transparent shape she knew only she could see. "My magic is a bitch."

"So are you." Amayo's ghost growled at her.

She burst into tears again.

Temperance

Mercy was as awe inspiring as she ever was. The mage had swept through the city, driving the invaders out, pushing them beyond the walls, before raising a barrier, holding it alone. No arrow, no spear, could pierce it.

It wasn't the only thing attacking the city, however. There was one thing Mercy hadn't been able to simply drive out, and had left it to Temperance's tender care. An enormous bloodthirsty troll, covered in the marks of a shaman. Marks that were proving effective.

Magic that hit the troll vanished, as did ice, fire and earth. Physical attacks seemed to reinforce the creature. He had to have a limit, everyone did, but as a Sin, those limits might be beyond what Temperance alone was capable of summoning.

Especially with the predicted navy also attacking the city.

She couldn't fight both Sloth and a veritable invading force. Both were capable of levelling this city. The Sin was her priority. If she could hurt him, permanently, then that increased the chances that the Nine might have.

All the same, she could see the fires of the port in the distance. Her home, with the baker who had shown her such kindness. A woman who should not die needlessly just because the Sins were attempting to make a world empire.

Just because magic vanished when it hit the troll, didn't mean he couldn't unleash it. Her scales tightened as the flames blistered over her, scorching her main. Another attack that was too large to be avoided.

She collapsed the ground beneath the troll, shocking the ground, but he barely fell for a moment before solidifying the air and leaping towards her. She couldn't afford to fight him, to bite him. Every physical attack made him stronger.

She shot into the air, spinning around, but a stream of metal struck out, wrapping around her ankle and yanking her towards the ground. As she fell, she saw the ships in the harbour disappearing, yanked underwater by an incredible force.

She grinned, before her teeth smashed into the ground. She groaned, pulling herself upright weakly.

Mercy said she'd be reaching out to the others. She had. Chastity was in the water, at the port. The navy was no longer a concern.

"Infernum!" A scream came, and the troll dodged as a ball of hellfire exploded in front of him.

A black shadow landed softly beside Temperance, smiling, "It seems hellfire is beyond his magical abilities. What do you say, Tempi? Help me out?"

She grinned at the Ker, and launched her magic forward, as Agathi twisted her infernal magic into it, creating a wall of hellfire that slammed into a barrier as the troll attempted to fight them.

"Mercy got your attention."

Agathi laughed, "The war did. This many souls dying? Of course I was already on my way. Now let's beat this fucker to a pulp."

Temperance felt the Ker climb inside her, unifying their bodies and magic. Agathi left the control to her, like she usually did. The wyrm shot forward with a sweep of her wings, grabbing the troll, and then igniting her own body.

He screamed, as she pinned him. She could feel his attacks. Flames, and ice. Dropping buildings atop her. None of that affected her. Not like this. All that there was left, was the anger and damn near unbreakable body.

She roared into his face, and then she bit out his throat.

Temperance staggered backwards as Agathi dropped out of her and onto the ground, and then she vomited, feeling the horror at what she had just done. His death might have been necessary, but she had killed too much. Lost control, too often.

The Ker pulled herself upright slowly, placing a calming hand on her shoulder, "It's going to be okay, Tempi. You can get through this."

She smiled weakly, "Two on one, we can beat the Sins."

Then they heard Mercy screaming inside their skulls. The sound was broadwaved, across every creature in the area. Every resonant piece of reality. Windows broke, the roads cracked. Weapons exploded in the hands of the soldiers carrying them.

Temperance stared across the city, to the edge of the Dark Row, and saw Mercy suspended in the air, wisps of hellfire wrapped around her, torturing her soul. "Go, Agathi!"

The shadow shook its head, and then shot across the distance, faster than Temperance could move. She couldn't catch up, but she would try. Mercy needed them.

The Ker was knocked back by a raised hand, and Temperance blinked as she found herself transported, on her knees before the Fury holding the human mage aloft. He smiled at them both, "More of the Nine. So virtuous of you to try and save your friend. Pointless, however. I am Eisa, the Wrath."

She swallowed nervously, "You will not win, Sin."

"I already have." He replied, and then Mercy died. Heart stopped, bones shattered, lungs imploded, brain reduced to liquid.

He tossed her body aside, as if it meant nothing to him and turned, "I'm leaving you alive, to deliver a message to Akheron, from me. He thought he was the only male Fury. He was wrong. The very first Fury carved by Yio, was me. Carved from her own heart.

He was also wrong about the Hellbound Prophecy. The only thing that made him possibly a fit, required him to accept the crown he has now reject.

I was born as one of three. One died at birth, and then I was the one who killed my sister, strangled by my own hands. I was a candidate. The only way to prove if it was I, or Akheron, who was the Heir of the Hells, was to test him.

He has failed.

I am the King of the Hells, and I will remake this realm to fit my vision. Let Akheron know how desperately he has failed. That purpose is the only reason I leave you, or any of the Nine, alive. Mercy is dead. Expect none from me."

Then he was gone.

The war began at home. With the fight for the Stormthrone.



Figure 7: Zanfrian Lightning